

Tennessee Legislature Bill Explainer



OVERVIEW

There are over [40 immigration-related bills](#) currently under consideration in the Tennessee Legislature. Eight of these were introduced in January of 2026, following a visit by key state legislators to the White House, where they met with Deputy Chief of Staff and Homeland Security Advisor Stephen Miller.

These bills address a range of immigration-related issues, with several including provisions that would expand requirements for immigration verification and reporting across public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and local agencies. If enacted, these measures would likely require additional training and administrative processes for staff responsible for compliance, placing added strain on institutions already managing limited resources. This may raise questions about how these responsibilities interact with their primary service roles.

One [proposal](#) makes it possible to charge those who are not willing to perform these enforcement measures with a criminal Class A misdemeanor, which carries potential jail time and fines.

An overview of several of these bills and their implications is provided below. For Christians, particularly for churches and faith-based organizations engaged in serving their communities, these developments raise important questions about responsibility, justice, and care for the vulnerable. Thoughtful, informed engagement will be essential in the days ahead.

[1711 Davis / SB 2108 White Bill Text:](#)

“Requires reporting by law enforcement agencies and local governmental entities and officials regarding persons not lawfully present in the United States; requires the department of finance and administration to report the annual cost incurred by this state for prisons, hospitals, and social services agencies to provide benefits and services to persons not lawfully present in the United States.”

What does this mean?

This bill would require social service agencies and hospitals to create new systems and procedures to verify and track the immigration status of anyone who accesses their services and report the cost to the state.

It also establishes a Class A misdemeanor offense, as described above, for law enforcement employees or officials who fail to report an undocumented individual who has been charged or convicted of a criminal offense. This introduces potential legal and professional risks for public servants tasked with carrying out these requirements.

Additionally, the bill raises questions about data privacy and confidentiality, especially in sensitive settings such as healthcare. Changes in reporting practices could affect how some individuals interact with public institutions, including whether they feel safe seeking urgently-needed medical care for members of the immigrant community or U.S. citizen children of immigrant parents.

Proponents of this bill argue that law enforcement must determine the fiscal impact of illegal immigration, alleging that undocumented individuals are benefiting from taxpayer services meant only for citizens. At the same time, [research](#) suggests that undocumented immigrants as a whole overpay in taxes and underutilize resources, meaning they contribute more than they use in public funding, as most public benefits are already restricted to exclude undocumented immigrants.

[HB 0793 Lamberth / SB 0386 Watson Bill Text:](#)

“Requires schools to have students who are enrolled or are seeking to enroll provide immigration or citizenship documents proving legal status, and to report on the number of students who produced sufficient documents, failed or refused to produce documents, or produced insufficient documents. These statistical reports would be sent to the Department of Finance and Administration, the centralized immigration enforcement division, the Governor, and legislative speakers.”

What does this mean?

This bill would require public schools to collect documentation from students who are enrolling or seeking to enroll to verify immigration or citizenship status.

Available data suggests undocumented students only comprise about [1 percent](#) of the K-12 student population in Tennessee. Implementing these requirements would likely require schools to establish new administrative processes for collecting, verifying, and reporting documentation. This could involve additional staff training and adjustments to enrollment procedures, potentially creating barriers to students far beyond the small percentage this bill aims to target. The [Immigration Research Initiative](#) estimates the cost could be up to \$55 million, and includes the need for potentially hundreds of additional personnel.

Opponents of this bill also argue that it interferes with access to public education, which is guaranteed to all children regardless of citizenship status by the Supreme Court decision in [Plyler v. Doe](#). In their 1982 decision, the Court found that any resources which might be saved from excluding undocumented children from public schools were far outweighed by the harms imposed on society at large from denying them an education.

Additionally, the state of Alabama, from 2011 to 2013, instituted a similar bill to Tennessee's. It was ultimately struck down as unconstitutional for violating *Plyler v. Doe*. While this rule was active, [data](#) from the state of Alabama shows that over 13% of all Latino students withdrew from school during this time, despite the number of immigrant students being only 0.5%. These examples raise questions about documentation requirements and how they impact enrollment for U.S. citizen children who may have immigrant family members, undocumented or otherwise.

In addition to concerns over possible absentee rates rising, measures like Alabama's and this proposed bill in Tennessee could require untrained school administrators to make complicated decisions outside of their expertise about immigration status; erode immigrant students' trust in teachers, counselors, and other school employees; create opportunities for racial and ethnic profiling; and introduce serious privacy violation concerns, including of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which prevents schools from disclosing information in student files without parental consent.

For Christians, this raises important questions about access to education, the role of public institutions, and how to uphold both the rule of law and the dignity of every child. Faith-based communities may need to consider how such policies affect families, schools, and the trust necessary for communities to flourish.

[HB 1710 Powers / SB 1915 Jackson Bill Text:](#)

"Mandates local governments and agencies to verify that each applicant for public benefits is a United States citizen or lawfully present in the United States; authorizes the attorney general and reporter to investigate violations of requirements for verification of citizenship or presence for public benefits; requires certain reporting related to such verification for benefits."

What does this mean?

Public benefits already have eligibility criteria, including restrictions based on immigration status. This bill would expand verification responsibilities at the local level, which would involve additional staff training and coordination with federal systems or databases.

In practice, this bill could involve introducing new procedures and requiring training for staff in order to differentiate between and verify ever-changing immigration statuses and documents. If they are unable to verify an individual's citizenship status, they would be required to refer them to

the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Supporters of the bill argue that these measures are necessary to ensure that public benefits are distributed in accordance with existing eligibility laws and to strengthen accountability in how taxpayer-funded services are administered.

At the same time, this bill specifies that all costs related to verifying status for benefit applications must be covered by the local government or agency, instead of the designated DHS budgets, further diverting staff and financial resources from the purpose of their work. The Tennessee Attorney General would also be empowered to withhold shared sales tax revenue from “noncompliant municipalities.” This means that taxpayer dollars will have to be spent on citizenship verification instead of returning to Tennesseans through public benefits such as SNAP and WIC; Families First (TANF), which already requires six forms of verification; and public schools

[HB 1705 Rudd / SB 1922 Briggs Bill text](#)

“Requires all state and local governmental employers to verify the work authorization status of each prospective employee through the federal E-Verify program prior to employment; authorizes the attorney general and reporter to enforce compliance with the requirement against local governments and subjects a noncompliant local government to the withholding of all funds of this state allocated to the local government via grant, contract, or statute, including, but not limited to, state-shared taxes.”

What does this mean?

This bill would require all state and local government employers to use the federal E-Verify system to confirm the work authorization status of prospective employees. It also authorizes the state attorney general to enforce compliance and allows for the withholding of state funds from local governments that do not comply.

Federal law already requires employers to verify employment eligibility through the I-9 process. This bill would add a requirement that public employers also use E-Verify, which would likely introduce additional procedural steps in hiring and onboarding.

In practice, this may require staff training and adjustments to existing hiring workflows. Agencies would need to ensure that verification is completed in accordance with both federal and state requirements.

Many opponents argue that E-Verify is a [flawed program](#) and has, in many instances, issued a Tentative Nonconfirmation (TNC) and eventually a Final Nonconfirmation (FNC) for a U.S. citizen or legal immigrant, flagging the individual as unauthorized to work in the U.S. when that is not the case. When this occurs, the employer must terminate the worker or face potential penalties. This can disproportionately affect workers of color, compounding existing hiring discrimination.

[HB1707 Scarbrough / SB 1952 Lowe Bill Text](#)

“Requires a local government entity to comply with a court order regarding an unlawful sanctuary policy within 120 days of the issuance of the court's order.”

What does this mean?

This bill makes the enactment of a sanctuary policy within the state of Tennessee a Class E Felony, punishable by 1 to 6 years in prison and fines up to \$3,000, and stipulates that each official who votes in the affirmative to adopt a sanctuary policy is in violation.

Sanctuary cities do not prevent federal authorities from conducting their own enforcement actions, nor do they grant legal status. Instead, they are intended to encourage trust between immigrant communities and local police, ensuring crimes are reported without fear of deportation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

For faith-based organizations, the implications of these bills are daunting. Many public services are provided through partnerships with various nonprofit and faith-based organizations. Affordable housing, foster care, disaster relief, and health clinics are all examples of often nonprofit-operated government services. Forced compliance and verification measures at the local level will change the nature of providing these services and create additional barriers to doing so. Creating this requirement puts the burden of verification on these service providers, who are not immigration enforcement officials, and may prevent them from realizing the mission of their work. Staff will have to devote time and resources to training in and implementing these new procedures, at the expense of their designated responsibilities.

In some instances, faith-based service providers or civil employees of faith may feel that these requirements interfere with God's call to care for the vulnerable and love their neighbor. Forced reporting compliance does not just create more bureaucratic processes; it also removes their ability to provide community services without fear of potentially endangering immigrant neighbors.

These bills, if enacted, could result in fear within the immigrant communities, undocumented or otherwise. This fear could be felt across all of civil society, and not just in the public square, resulting in church attendance decreases and children being kept home from school. Those who utilize services offered by non-governmental organizations will be unable to access them. Christian colleges and universities who depend on the enrollment and tuition of [international students](#), are already experiencing [declines in their enrollment](#) as students are unable or afraid to study in the U.S. Unfortunately, these effects are already being seen across many states, including Tennessee, and will only continue to grow as anti-immigrant sentiment and policies increase.