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Cerabino: The divergent paths of two Florida immigration bills reveal sanctuary for hypocrisy

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Florida's going to continue being a sanctuary state.

You may have heard rumblings about cracking down on those pesky undocumented immigrants. It makes for great political posturing.

But Florida relies on immigrant labor, both documented and undocumented. And if you don't believe me, look what's happening right now in the state Legislature.

There are two bills dealing with undocumented people living and working in Florida.

One bill is aimed at "sanctuary cities" in Florida — cities that, according to the bill's own analysis, may not even exist.

And the other bill would require employers to use an E-Verify system that would effectively make it harder to hire undocumented workers.

Guess which bill is being fast-tracked to approval, and which one can't get even get a committee hearing?

Yes, the empty screed against imaginary sanctuary cities is sailing through the Republican-led legislature, while the bill that would effectively stop giving employment sanctuary to the undocumented is dying. Again.

This isn't new.

Railing against undocumented immigrants while protecting their place here is a well-beaten path.

Remember Gov. Rick Scott? He got elected saying that he would push for both E-Verify and a show-your-papers law that would allow local police officers the authority to stop suspicious-looking Floridians (brown people?) and ask them to prove their citizenship.

Never happened. Fast forward eight years, and we have our new governor, Ron DeSantis, who took the shortcut to the governor's mansion by making himself enough of a provocateur on Fox News to get the attention and early endorsement of President Donald Trump.

During the campaign, DeSantis was a lot more fiery when it came to immigration. He blamed his primary opponent, Adam Putnam, the state's secretary of agriculture, for not supporting an E-Verify law to weed out the undocumented among us.

"He won't do that, because his Big Ag donors that fund his campaign want that cheap foreign labor," DeSantis said on Fox News. "I will sign E-Verify into law here in the state of Florida."

No, he won't.

DeSantis, like Scott, is learning that Florida's agricultural, hospitality and construction industries rely on undocumented workers. And powerful lobbying groups, including the Florida Chamber of Commerce, don't want employers to have to hire less-productive and less-willing domestic workers.

The Florida Chamber of Commerce applauded the recent actions of the Florida Constitution Revision Commission — a 37-member group with 34 of its members picked by Scott — when it voted down putting an E-Verify hiring requirement in the state constitution.

See? Florida businesses want undocumented workers.

The non-partisan Migration Policy Institute estimates that there are more than 400,000 undocumented workers in Florida, with about 30 percent of them working in jobs that pay a poverty-level wage.

So, rather than upset the sanctuary given to Florida's employers, lawmakers pretend that the real issue with immigrants is the lack of cooperation that some cities and counties have with federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

But that's a real stretch.

The closest thing Florida has to a sanctuary city is West Palm Beach, which issued a "Welcoming City" proclamation two years ago, announcing that city workers and police wouldn't be going out of their way to round up undocumented people living here.

The city action prohibited employees from investigating citizenship, disclosing information about someone's immigration status, requiring federal identification documents instead of a Florida driver license, or using the city police department to act as federal enforcers.

That made West Palm Beach the only city in Florida to be put on grant review by the U.S. Department of Justice, a review coordinated through the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE).

The penalty for non-compliance would have meant the city would lose its share of federal grants. But West Palm Beach didn't lose them.

"The City of West Palm Beach now appears to be on the current FDLE list of jurisdictions that have submitted certifications stating that it is in compliance with federal immigration laws," the staff analysis of the pending Senate Bill 168 reads.

The pending bill orders local jurisdictions to give their "best efforts" to help federal immigration agents, and to refrain from issuing sanctuary-friendly policies.

It also makes new rules on county jails, requiring detention holds for undocumented immigrants who end up there, and leaving counties to try to recoup the new costs of these detentions from the federal government.

In short, the bill treats undocumented immigrants as a criminal justice problem, when their main role in Florida is as a mostly-law-abiding indispensable workforce.

So, yes. Florida is a sanctuary state, a sanctuary for the shameful lack of decency that keeps getting rewarded, and the kind of hypocrisy that vilifies the people we can't live without.

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