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Illegal immigrants come to Texas as other states pass tough laws

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HOUSTON — Illegal immigrants are coming into Texas, but not from where one might think.

The rush is coming from Oklahoma, Arizona and other states, places that have recently passed tough new anti-illegal immigrant laws.

The two toughest measures are in Oklahoma and Arizona.

The Oklahoma statute, which took effect in November, makes it a crime to transport, harbor or hire illegal immigrants. Effective Jan. 1, the Arizona law suspends the business license of employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers. On a second offense, the license is revoked.

Anecdotal information seems to indicate that illegal immigrants are leaving these states in growing numbers.

"They're really tightening the screws," said Mario Ortiz, an undocumented Mexican worker who came to Houston after leaving Phoenix last year. "There have been a lot coming — it could be 100 a day."

In Tulsa, Okla., the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce has estimated that 15,000 to 25,000 illegal immigrants have left the area. One builder estimated that 30 percent of the Hispanic work force left Tulsa.

"There's been a tremendous impact in Oklahoma City," said David Castillo, the executive director of the Greater Oklahoma City Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. "We've had several companies close shop and leave the state. Banks have called us and say they're closing 30 accounts per week."

Enrique Hubbard, Mexico's consul general in Dallas, said a dozen Mexican families from Oklahoma have applied for consular documents listing their new homes in the Dallas area. He expects more to arrive because jobs are available in North Texas.

Texas' reputation as a welcoming destination has experts predicting more immigrants will come to Houston and other cities in the state. Texas has not passed any statewide law targeting the employment of undocumented workers.

"Texas is still very much an entrepreneurial place, where you can find your place in this economy," said James Hollifield, a Southern Methodist University professor and migration expert. "It's not an immigrant's paradise, but if you work hard and keep your head down you can get ahead."

Ortiz, a native of southern Mexican state of Tabasco, said he left Phoenix eight months ago working 60 to 70 hours a week as a nursery worker. While now he can only pick up two to three days a week of yardwork and barely earns enough to send back to his family, he prefers to be in Texas.

"Here, they let you work. Over there, they won't. There is a lot of racism, but here there isn't — it's better," Ortiz said of Houston.

Information from: Houston Chronicle, <http://www.houstonchronicle.com>

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