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Credit ID bill hits raw nerve

Blackburn plan to ban credit cards for illegals is noted across nation

By Bartholomew Sullivan
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WASHINGTON — The offices of U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., have been flooded with calls after the Drudge Report circulated a story from The Commercial Appeal about her plan to prevent illegal immigrants from applying for credit cards.

Blackburn introduced the Photo Identification Security Act on Monday to prevent immigrants from using Mexican identity cards, called matricula consulars, as part of their identification for opening bank accounts. Blackburn cited the danger to financial institutions as a concern.

Banks can legally use a variety of forms of identification to open bank accounts but can't use the matricula consular alone for that purpose.

The Bank of America, whose pilot program in Los Angeles County has come under the fiercest attacks by Blackburn and her allies, says it uses only forms of identification authorized by the U.S.A. Patriot Act.

The Commercial Appeal received dozens of e-mail and phone messages from across the country Wednesday about Blackburn's proposed bill, and Matthew Lambert, a Blackburn spokesman, said the office "has been flooded with calls from constituents all across the district and all across the state."

Said Roland East, 51, a caller from Wayne, Pa.: "They shouldn't even have bank accounts. They shouldn't have the money to put in bank accounts because they shouldn't be hired unless they're here legally."

John Keeley, director of communications for the Center for Immigration Studies, a nonpartisan Washington think tank, said Blackburn clearly has tapped a raw nerve in the body politic.

"There's been a staying power of grass-roots and majority interests and outrage about just how bad things have gotten with the illegal immigration crisis," said Keeley. "The citizenry is expecting action, and the Tennessee congressman is acknowledging that."

Tennessee Bankers Association general counsel Tim Amos said the banks will comply with any new regulations that go beyond their current identification guidelines aimed at protecting financial institutions and preventing money laundering.

However, he said he would be concerned about whether the new identification requirements would affect money-transfer programs endorsed by the Federal Reserve that might drive that business to unregulated systems.

Memphis immigration lawyer Greg Siskind suggested the bill only "dances around" the larger issue of how to handle 10 million to 20 million illegal immigrants, including many who are well assimilated into the country.

Siskind said politicians such as Blackburn are trying to isolate illegal immigrants by taking away "right after right ... to make life as miserable as we can for them," but won't call for deportation because they know it would bankrupt the country and tear families apart.

"It's just a lot easier to demagogue on these kinds of issues than to actually address the problem," he said.

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