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Document all drivers for safety's sake

By Amy Gottlieb and Deborah Jacobs

Rumors are flying that Gov. Jon Corzine's Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel on Immigrant Policy will soon recommend that the governor support so-called "Driving Privilege Cards" for undocumented immigrants in the state.

Even without an actual recommendation or report, the media and public response has been overwhelmingly negative, bringing back memories of the backlash against then-Governor Elliot Spitzer when our neighbor state recognized the benefits of ensuring that all state residents have access to drivers' licenses.

Rather than cave in to the backlash, New Jersey must develop sound policy that addresses the public safety concerns of all residents and drivers in the state.

The best policy we can develop would require all individuals who drive in the state to obtain licenses after presenting valid ID and passing a driving test.

As in New York, the clamor against licenses has tangled two issues -- safety and immigration status - and gets them both wrong. First, safety. Experts have confirmed again and again that roads are safer when drivers are licensed and insured. A policy that restricts licenses based on immigration status in a state that relies heavily on cars is setting us up for an increased number of unlicensed drivers. Allowing state residents who can pass the requisite driving tests and present valid, authentic identification to obtain licenses is sound public policy that will lead to safer, better and insured drivers.

National security experts also recognize the importance of identification and knowing who is living among us.

A driver's license functions as a de facto identification card, whether we admit it or not. Denying licenses based on immigration status alone perpetuates a class of individuals who cannot access valid state identification and are pushed into the shadows. Expanding the current system to include documents that are widely accepted even by the State Department, such as valid passports, will bring people out into the open.

The second issue, immigration status, is one that New Jersey cannot address -- it is up to the federal government to create immigration policy. But with 28 percent of the state's work force foreign born, it is essential to recognize that immigrants are contributing to our tax base, strengthening our local economies, and are integral to the vibrancy of our communities.

The fact that millions of immigrants throughout the country cannot legalize their immigration status is the fault of a system that over the years has valued certain people over others, has not recognized the factors that drive migration in the first place and desperately needs to be overhauled.

Alternatives to the current stalemate exist. While the federal government updates our immigration laws and policies to reflect current realities, New Jersey can establish itself as a leader in the interest of public safety by providing licenses regardless of immigration status. Just because the federal government has failed to enact sound policy on immigration does not mean that New Jersey should create policies that carry on that dysfunction.
