

Congress eyes biometric authentication for job eligibility

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In a move likely to worry opponents of a national ID card, some lawmakers in Congress are proposing that biometrics be used to authenticate the identity of anyone seeking a job in the U.S.

In a move likely to heighten concerns among opponents of a national ID card, some lawmakers are proposing that biometrics be used to authenticate the identity of anyone seeking a job in the U.S.

At a hearing by the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship, lawmakers from both parties expressed broad support Tuesday for strengthening the [E-Verify online employment eligibility verification program](#) with biometrics.

The chairman of the subcommittee, Sen. Charles Schumer, (D-N.Y.), said that E-Verify only checks whether the name, date of birth, citizenship status and other details provided by a job applicant match those in official records from the Social Security Administration and the IRS. The process does little to stop identity thieves and those using identity credentials fraudulently from working illegally in the U.S.

"It is not difficult for illegal workers to scam the system," because there's no reliable way check identities, he said.

What is needed is a "tough, fair and effective employment verification system" that relies on the use of a "non-forgable" biometric identifier, such as fingerprints or palm prints and digital photos, to authenticate the identities of job seekers, he said. Only with such a system is it possible for employers to reliably check the eligibility of new hires, he said.

Schumer's sentiments were echoed by Sen. John Cornyn, (R-Texas), who also backed the use of "secure, tamper proof" ID cards for employment eligibility verification. Cornyn called the E-Verify system "broken" and said the system needs better direction, legal authority and resources.

Rep. Luis Gutierrez, (D-Ill.), urged Congress to ignore "naysayers" opposed to biometric authentication. With adequate security, privacy protections and care, a biometric-based employment verification system is the "only hope" for dealing with illegal employment, he said.

While the lawmakers stressed the need for adequate checks and balances -- and a close eye on costs -- the proposals are sure to add fuel to the already a [contentious debate](#) over the use of E-Verify.

That program, run jointly by the Department of Homeland Security's Citizen and Immigration Services unit and the Social Security Administration (SSA), is a free Internet-based system that lets employers compare job application information against DHS and SSA data. Starting Sept. 8, federal contracts will be awarded only to employers that use the online E-Verify system to make sure new workers are legally allowed to work in the U.S.

[According to the DHS](#), the SSA database holds some 425 million records, while the DHS immigration databases hold more than 60 million. In most cases, employers get search results in seconds. The system has processed a total of 6 million employee verification requests since last October.

While supporters of the system say it is sorely needed to weed out undocumented workers, critics argue that the program is unreliable. Critics have contended that some information stored in the SSA and DHS databases is flawed or outdated and hasn't been updated for years. They also contend that people could be deemed ineligible to work in the U.S. due to common misspellings or because of name changes, and note that those with flawed data have little recourse to challenge inaccurate results.

At yesterday's hearing, for instance, Sen. Russ Feingold, (D-Wis.) said the E-Verify data set is "filled with errors" and has incorrect data on more than 12 million people. If the program were to become mandatory, it would result in at least 600,000 people being incorrectly deemed ineligible to work in the U.S., Feingold said. "That kind of error rate makes the system unworkable," he said.

Adding a biometric component to the E-Verify program will only will further "invade Americans' privacy and create a new employment blacklist," the American Civil Liberties Union warned in testimony submitted to the subcommittee. "From a practical point of view, a biometric system is the worst of both worlds," ACLU counsel Chris Calabrese wrote. Under the biometric ID system, individuals would need to visit a government agency, provide proof of identity and then have their fingerprint or some other biometric recorded. That biometric would then either be put into a database or on an ID card.

"This is a quintessential national ID system," Calabrese wrote.

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