

Johnson County explores ID program

Cards also would include undocumented immigrants

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Executive director of the Center for Worker Justice Misty Rebik is a strong believer in the benefits of community identification cards, issued by local government or a not-for-profit to assist immigrants and low-income people who don't have driver's licenses. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)

IOWA CITY – Nataly Hernandez-Grageda moved from Mexico to Iowa City in November, yet she still carries her passport around.

That's because it's her only form of identification. So when she goes shopping or takes a charter bus trip with her husband, David, a doctoral student in economics at the University of Iowa, and must prove who she is, she uses her Mexican passport.

Along with the safety risk – people usually keep passports locked away when not needed – Hernandez-Grageda, 29, sometimes feels discriminated against, and less a part of the community, after she shows it.

“It’s been hard because, for almost every interaction I encounter, they ask me for an ID,” she said through a translator.

There’s a push in the works in Johnson County for the creation of a locally issued identification card that advocates say would help people such as Hernandez-Grageda and others who don’t always have common forms of identification, such as a driver’s license or a state-issued card.

That may include undocumented immigrants, which could put Johnson County in the spotlight on the hot-button issue of immigration.

If it comes to be, the Iowa City area would join about 10 other communities, none of which are in the Midwest, to have a community ID program that doesn’t take into account a person’s immigration status. New York City also is contemplating starting its own program.

A lot of details need to be figured out before a locally issued ID card becomes a reality. But Johnson County Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Janelle Rettig said she’s open to the county overseeing a program.

“I see a lot of positives to it,” she said. “The drawbacks are more so philosophical and logistical, and I think that can get worked out.”

The philosophical concern for Rettig is ensuring a card does not become mandatory for public services. Logistical matters include figuring out who would run the program and how it would be funded.

The basic idea is for a locally issued card for accessing services and to use at businesses that voluntarily recognize it.

Supporters said it also would make people, particularly immigrants, more comfortable dealing with law enforcement.

The conversation in Johnson County started more than year ago when immigrants expressed concerns that a lack of valid identification in interactions with law enforcement possibly could lead to their being taken into custody or even deported, said Misty Rebik, executive director of the Iowa City-based Center for Worker Justice, which works with immigrants and low-income people, among others.

“People were feeling like if they had a way to properly identify themselves with police, things would be less severe,” she said.

Iowa City's Human Rights Commission and a city diversity committee supported the pursuit of a municipal ID card, and last August University of Iowa law professor Stella Burch Elias offered to research the issue, with the help of her students, for the city of Iowa City. That report was submitted earlier this year and determined interest would be significant.

Elias played a role in the development of what is believed to be the first municipal ID card program in the United States in New Haven, Conn., in 2007.

Public safety for immigrants was the primary concern in New Haven, said Kica Matos, who worked for a not-for-profit organization that advocated for what is known as the Elm City Resident Card, and later became the administrator of the city department that oversaw the program.

Undocumented immigrants lacking bank accounts were being robbed because they were known to have cash on them or in their homes, Matos said. They were even called "open ATMs," she said.

Victims were reluctant to make police reports for fear of being exposed as undocumented, Matos said.

At the five-year anniversary of the ID program, the [New Haven Police Department said](#) crime reporting had increased but criminal activity had decreased. It also said the card had improved the relationship between the police and undocumented immigrants.

With 131,000 residents, New Haven is similar in size to Johnson County, which has a population of 139,000.

Card holders, who must offer proof of identity and residence and pay \$11, use it for government services, to apply for jobs, to open bank accounts and more.

Not wanting the card to become a "scarlet letter" for immigrants, features were added to appeal to other people, said Matos, who is now director of immigrant rights and racial justice at the Center for Community Change in Washington, D.C.

It can serve as a debit card, a library card and children can list emergency contact information and allergies.

The city has issued more than 10,000 cards including renewals, said Lisa Wilson, New Haven's registrar for vital statistics.

The city received a grant and did not spend any city money to start the ID program. It budgeted \$119,730 in fiscal 2009 and \$124,169 [the next year](#) for three employees for it.

Wilson said that office has been dissolved and her office runs the program. She did not have a breakdown for what it costs in employee hours and supplies.

San Francisco, with 826,000 residents, also has its own ID card. Start-up costs in 2009 were \$828,000, and it now has two employees administering it, according to the report done for Iowa City.

Another model is having a not-for-profit organization issue the card with the endorsement of local governments. That's what is done in Mercer County in New Jersey, where the program is run by the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Executive Director Maria Juega said about 6,000 cards have been issued in the county of 370,400 people since 2009. Cards are used in interactions with law enforcement, to access health care, obtain a library card, reserve a picnic spot in a public park and as secondary identification to open a bank account, she said.

Private businesses cannot be forced to accept the cards, but Juega said many find it in their financial interest to do so. Nancy Quellhorst, president and CEO of the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce, said the same likely would be true in Johnson County.

Quellhorst said along with the obvious benefit of additional customers, a secondary plus would be, if more people are keeping their money in banks and credit unions, those financial institutions would be able to loan more money, thus helping businesses not connected to the ID program.

"In terms of the economic impact, that's a pretty sizable constituency to augment (financial institutions') savings," she said.

About 12,200 Johnson County residents were born in another country, according to 2012 U.S. Census data.

The cards are not without controversy, however. They have been met with opposition by individuals and organizations in the communities that have them, and in some cases legal challenges.

Just a couple of days after New Haven voted to establish its program in 2007, federal agents arrested 32 immigrants in what the city called a "retaliatory raid."

A spokesman for a not-for-profit organization that seeks improved border security and an end to illegal immigration said state-issued ID cards should suffice and a local program in the Iowa City area could help undocumented immigrants obtain false identification.

“Our view is local government should not be taking steps to make it easier for people to live here in violation of federal immigration laws,” said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform in Washington, D.C.

Rettig, the Johnson County supervisor, said she has seen a couple of negative comments on Facebook about the local proposal.

Iowa City Mayor Matt Hayek said the city has no formal position on the matter at this time, but he believes there’s merit to an ID program done on a communitywide basis.

“If an appropriate program can be created that makes sense to the issuer of that card, of course we would be supportive,” he said. “But the devil’s in the details in this case.”

Johnson County Attorney Janet Lyness is trying to determine some of those details. She said Iowa City, Coralville and North Liberty would need to participate for a county-administered program to be effective.

She supports a community ID and believes it would improve public safety.

“That’s one of the things I’ve been worried about is that people who do not have access to IDs are reluctant to report crimes ... and also may not volunteer to be witnesses because they fear that their document status may affect them,” Lyness said.

While immigrants account for many of the cardholders elsewhere, supporters said other people would benefit, too.

Roberta Till-Retz and her husband, Jae, were born in the United States and are longtime Iowa City residents. In 2008, the basement of their home along the Iowa River flooded, destroying many of their vital documents, including passports, birth certificates and their marriage license.

At 74, Till-Retz only drives when necessary and isn’t sure how much longer she’ll have a driver’s license. She could get a state-issued ID and her vital documents replaced, but she’s looked up the process and found it to be too daunting.

A community ID card, she said, would serve their purposes just fine and be more convenient.

“When I don’t want a driver’s license, why should I get a driver’s license?” she said, adding, “It’s really just too overwhelming.”

Read more: <http://thegazette.com/2014/03/30/johnson-county-explores-id-program/#ixzz2yPOmjotC>