

Democrats renew push for driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants in Massachusetts

pressures state lawmakers to pass bill allowing

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State House News Service

Newly framing the measure as a public health priority, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley and Northwestern District Attorney David Sullivan are teaming with union officials to pressure state lawmakers to pass a bill making up to 78,000 undocumented immigrants in Massachusetts eligible to obtain a standard driver's license over the next three years.

The phased economic reopening underway in Massachusetts amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions about people safely returning to the MBTA as well as a possible sudden surge in driving. The Transportation Committee in early February voted 14-4 to endorse a bill (S 2641) to allow qualified Massachusetts immigrants to obtain a standard state driver's license, regardless of immigration status. The measure has not moved any further and remains in the Senate Ways and Means Committee, chaired by Michael Rodrigues, a Westport Democrat.

"This bill – to license all drivers, regardless of immigration status – needs to be an essential piece of our public health and economic recovery policy. Without driver's licenses, many of our essential workers have to crowd onto buses or subway cars to get to work. This puts their lives and our community's health at risk," Natalicia Tracy, executive director of the Brazilian Workers Center, said in a statement Thursday morning.

At 6 p.m., Pressley, Sullivan, Mass. AFL-CIO President Steven Tolman and others plan to host a virtual town hall to promote the bill and hear from people “sharing their experiences on the barriers they face when they are unable to obtain driver’s licenses.”

“The urgency for this policy is greater than ever,” Roxana Rivera, vice president of 32BJ SEIU, said. “Before the pandemic, this policy was common sense. Now, it is about protecting lives and helping workers put food on the table. If undocumented workers are better able to access good jobs safely, they will help our economy bounce back more quickly and help the state generate more revenue in the long term.”

Town hall organizers say the latest data show there are about 185,000 undocumented immigrants living in Massachusetts, and an estimated 41,000 to 78,000 drivers would likely obtain licenses within the first three years of the bill’s implementation. The town hall will include live interpretation in Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, and Haitian Creole. Legislative leaders have not made the bill a priority in recent years and Gov. Charlie Baker opposes it.