

IMMIGRATION

Pleasant surprise

>> Businesses unaware of MDES' E-Verify service

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The business community had serious concerns back in 2008 when the Mississippi Employment Protection Act was signed into law. The legislation requires companies to use the E-Verify system to screen employees to ensure they are legal. Noncompliance means stiff, potentially business-killing penalties.

Now, the business community seems largely unaware — and pleasantly surprised — that the Mississippi Department of Employment Security will complete the E-Verify process for employers. Not only is it free, it takes all of the liability from the employer if an E-Verify issue is subsequently discovered.

All Mike Pepper, head of the Mississippi Road Builders Association, could only say last week when he learned of the program was, "Wow, can you believe that? Why didn't (MDES) let us know? That is huge."

Businesses of all types and sizes voiced concerns when the Mississippi Employment Protection Act became law. However, small businesses, with their limited in-house resources, and contractors, who stand to lose public construction projects if found in noncompliance, were especially nervous.

Yet, no trade groups contacted for this story were aware of MDES' E-Verify service. The Mississippi Road Builders

Association, Mississippi Associated Builders and Contractors, Associated General Contractors of Mississippi and Mississippi Main Street Association were all surprised to learn that the MDES has offered this free E-Verify service since the law was enacted in 2008.

"(The MDES) can expect their phones to start ringing, because I'm telling everybody," said Perry Nations, head of AGC/Mississippi.

One who was not surprised is Ron Aldridge, director of the 3,600-member National Federation of Independent Business/Mississippi. Aldridge is also a 10-year member of the MDES' Advisory Council, and he along with fellow Council member John Baas, director of government affairs at the Mississippi Manufacturers Association, played a lead role in getting the E-Verify service implemented. They also spearheaded a recent addition to the program.

"When the MDES says, 'We're from the government and we're here to help,' they truly do," said Aldridge, who added that MDES was the first state agency of its kind to offer E-Verify assistance in the nation.

"We thought it was the right thing to do, and we're proud to offer the service," said Stan McMorris, deputy executive director of the MDES.

The basic MDES E-Verify program works like this: Companies file a job order with their local WIN Job Center. The Center screens applicants to ensure they meet the stated job requirements. When a viable candidate is identified, the Center refers them to the prospective employer. If

the employer likes the candidate and wants to hire him, the employer contacts the WIN Job Center, which then completes the E-Verify process on the prospective employee and forwards it to the employer.

The MDES program was recently augmented to include reverse referrals. Instead of a WIN Job Center referring prospects to the employer, reverse referral allows employers to screen applicants before they go to a local Center. When the employer finds a candidate he likes, he refers them to a WIN Job Center, which makes sure the candidate matches the job requirements, conducts the E-Verify screening and forwards the paperwork to the employer.

Thus, the employer is free from any E-Verify-related liability, a relief for employers due to the penalty for noncompliance. The law states that companies found in willful noncompliance "shall be subject to the cancellation of any state or public contract, resulting in ineligibility for any state or public contract for up to three (3) years, the loss of any license, permit, certificate or other document granted to the employer by any agency, department or government entity in the State of Mississippi for up to one (1) year, or both."

McMorris said the turnaround time on the E-Verify service is "a few minutes."

The MDES recently announced it was trimming 40 workers due to budget shortfalls. McMorris said the MDES was confident it could meet the demand for the E-Verify service even with the smaller staff, and quickly added that none of the 50-plus WIN Job Centers across the state were closing due to the budget woes.

For more information on the E-Verify service, contact the MDES at (601) 321-6000, or visit www.mdes.ms.gov.