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Advocacy Group Scores

By JOSEPH DE AVILA

Earlier this year, it appeared Connecticut advocates calling for a law allowing illegal immigrants to obtain drivers licenses would need to wait until next year, after a state legislative committee failed to vote on the proposal.

That's when the real push began.

Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut, a coalition of 28 religious organizations that was the lead advocacy group calling for the change, continued doggedly lobbying state lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. In April, Conect organized a rally for the cause that drew the mayors of Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven, along with the Democratic speaker of the House, Brendan Sharkey.

The work paid off: On Thursday morning, the state Senate gave final approval to a measure that makes Connecticut one of a handful of states to allow illegal immigrants to drive.

"I didn't think we would be

able to get it done in its first try. It was really all [Conect's] doing," said Democratic state Sen. Andrew Maynard. "We helped them with the process, but it was their persistence...that really made it work."

It was the most high-profile advocacy achievement to date for Conect, a group comprising churches, synagogues and mosques in Fairfield and New Haven counties founded in 2011.

"Myself along with our congregants are learning how politics and how the political process works," said the Rev. James Manship, co-chairman of Conect, which has about 15,000 congregants. "Most people said, 'Nothing is really dead until the [legislative] session is over with.'"

In 2011, Conect began speaking with Mr. Maynard and others about the concept of allowing illegal immigrants to get driver's licenses. They returned again in 2012, and in 2013 a bill was introduced for the first time in Connecticut.

Conect made the case that it

was a public-safety issue that affected all residents and motorists in Connecticut.

"There is a practical manner, here: People need driver's licenses to conduct their lives," Rev. Manship said.

Many Republicans said they supported the concept and understood the public-safety arguments, but all Republicans in the state House and the Senate eventually voted against the proposal.

"I could have been supportive of that bill and I think I would have been," said Republican state Sen. Len Fasano.

But he pointed to problems he had with legislative language in the proposal.

For example, it said applicants would need to pass a Connecticut state background check but wouldn't be screened for crimes in other states. Also, under the new law, applicants would be able to use passports that have been expired less than three years before the application, while legal residents cannot use expired passports when applying

for licenses. He said that was unfair to legal residents.

Despite his opposition to this particular bill, Mr. Fasano said he wants to collaborate on other issues with Conect. He and the group are discussing working on a farming program for some of the urban areas of the state. "There are many issues we can talk about," he said.

Rev. Manship said Conect intends to remain active in other political issues, including discussions on how to implement the new federal health-care law and ways to curb gun violence.

While Conect enjoyed early success pushing for driver's licenses, future political achievements may not come as easily, Mr. Maynard said.

"I would suspect that they have to feel empowered by their success here," he said. "I would caution them that you are not always going to bat .750 in your rookie season. Disappointments lay ahead no doubt."

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