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By Trish G. Graber

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TRENTON -- Immigration rights advocates are making a push for long-stalled legislation that would qualify undocumented immigrants for the same lower tuition rates New Jersey residents pay at state colleges and universities.

Advocacy and faith-based groups organized roughly 100 of their members at the Statehouse today to lobby lawmakers to pass the bill Gov. Jon Corzine leaves office next month.

Shai Goldstein, executive director of New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, called the issue one of "fundamental justice."

"How can we, the great state of New Jersey, not allow - not allow - access to our great universities, our great public universities, when other states like Oklahoma and Utah have done so?" Goldstein said. "We are denying these students equal access to education. Period."

Undocumented immigrants pay out-of-state tuition at the state's public colleges and universities, a much higher rate than the in-state amount. At Montclair State University, for example, an in-state undergraduate student would pay \$9,674 this year for tuition and fees, while out-of-state students would pay \$17,685, according to the New Jersey Association of Colleges and Universities.

Advocates for the legislation said the high cost prevents children - many who have lived nearly their entire lives in New Jersey - from going to college.

The legislation (S1036/A990) would make students who attended at least three years of high school in New Jersey eligible for in-state college tuition. The student must also have graduated from a state high school or attained the equivalent of a high school diploma in New Jersey. In addition, it would require undocumented students to file an affidavit with the college or university stating they filed an application to legalize their immigration status or will do so as soon as they become eligible.

Corzine supports the measure and has said in recent months it is one he would "put high on the agenda" for the lame-duck session. Republican Gov.-elect Chris Christie opposes the idea, and has said only lawful taxpayers deserve a tuition break because they help subsidize in-state institutions.

Eleven states have enacted similar legislation, according to the groups: New York, Texas, California, Illinois, Utah, Washington, Oklahoma, Kansas, New Mexico, Nebraska and Wisconsin

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