

# House immigration bill offers citizenship

The effort includes measures to appeal to conservatives, including tougher security and enforcement and a requirement that illegal immigrants leave and return.

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WASHINGTON — Two lawmakers will fire the opening salvo in this year's immigration debate Thursday when they introduce the first House bill in many years to call for citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Reps. Luis V. Gutierrez (D-Ill.) and Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) will unveil broad legislation that would also create a new worker program, stiffen worker verification procedures and overhaul the visa system to reduce waiting times for legal immigrants.

In recognition of the tensions that surround the controversial issue, the bill also contains provisions designed to appeal to conservatives who want stronger border enforcement and oppose citizenship provisions that grant amnesty to people in the country illegally.

One measure would ensure that tough border security and work-site enforcement standards are met before other changes can go forward. Another would require illegal immigrants eligible for citizenship under the bill to leave the country and return legally.

The congressmen, veterans of the immigration issue, are introducing their legislation at a time when Senate efforts to craft a bill have stalled, even as the Bush administration has worked intensely to build GOP support. Flake and Gutierrez worked with Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) to craft a joint bill before moving ahead on their own.

Kennedy praised their bill Tuesday and said he was optimistic a Senate bill would soon follow. He said lawmakers wanted "a tough but fair bill that strikes the right balance between protecting our security, strengthening our economy, and enacting laws that uphold our humanity."

Early reaction from conservative Republicans was guarded. "They seem to be moving in the right direction here," said Rep. Brian P. Bilbray (R-Solana Beach), "but moving away from rewarding people for being here illegally is an essential part of repairing our immigration system."

On Tuesday, Gutierrez emphasized that their chances of success would dim if the House and Senate did not pass their respective bills by July, because the approaching election year would make it harder. He also noted that the bill had to have bipartisan support to pass.

As part of the pitch for conservative support, Gutierrez pointed to the provision requiring illegal immigrants to leave the country.

"This will say, 'Listen, you left and you ... actually went through the legal process of entering the United States,' " he said in a conference call with members of the nation's ethnic media. "Is it going to sound somewhat absurd to some people? Certainly it will. But it's a requirement that many [Republicans] wish in the bill."

Illegal immigrants would be eligible for legalization if they arrived in the U.S. before June 1, 2006. They would have to pay a \$2,000 fine and back taxes, and pass background and security checks. If after six years they have learned English and civics, kept a clean record, and the head of household has left and reentered the U.S. legally, they could become legal permanent residents, a step toward citizenship.

Unlike a Senate bill passed last year, those leaving the U.S. would not have to go to their home countries, but could travel to Canada or Mexico. Exceptions to the requirement would be made for children, the elderly, single heads of households, business owners and those in military service.

Much of the bill is based on work Flake and Gutierrez did with McCain and Kennedy last year.

More than half of it deals with border security and enforcement.

Gutierrez said the bill's border security provisions focused more on "smart technology, not fences." They call for more border patrol agents and better coordination with Latin American countries.

The bill would increase penalties for crimes committed by immigrants, including human smuggling, gang activity, and visa and document fraud. Unlike the enforcement-only bill passed by the House last year, the Flake-Gutierrez legislation would allow immigrants some access to courts.

The legislation would mandate a new biometric system that employers would use to verify that workers have legal status. Gutierrez said the administration had pledged to have a system in place by the end of 2008.

The bill incorporates the "Dream Act," which would allow illegal immigrants to pay in-state rates for college tuition and give those brought to the United States as youngsters a way to gain citizenship.

Flake and Gutierrez have folded in the AgJobs bill, which would create a dedicated-worker program for the agricultural industry.

They have also crafted a more general program that would admit up to 400,000 low-

skilled workers a year for jobs that employers were unable to fill with Americans. The Department of Homeland Security would have to certify that it could accurately verify those workers' documents before the program could begin.

These "new workers," as Gutierrez calls them, would be guaranteed the same wages and working conditions as Americans, and could change jobs. The visas would be good for three years, and renewable for another three years. After that, according to Angela Kelley of the National Immigration Forum, workers would be eligible to apply for permanent residency through an employer petition or, after five years, by petitioning on their own.

"This isn't about people coming here temporarily, working and then shipping them off," Gutierrez said, "but about new workers incorporating themselves and, if they wish, integrating themselves fully and their families into the very fiber of American society."