

Legal Immigrants Rally at Capitol to Protest Backlog

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 18 — About 1,000 highly skilled legal immigrants, carrying placards and wearing T-shirts emblazoned with American flags, rallied Tuesday at the Capitol to protest long delays and vast bureaucratic backlogs in the immigration system.

The immigrants, including doctors, medical technicians and computer engineers from India and China, came from as far as California and Washington State to call on Congress to provide more permanent visas for highly educated immigrants and more resources for the overburdened immigration system. They said the plight of foreigners living in this country legally had been unfairly eclipsed by the polarized debate over illegal immigration that led to the defeat of an immigration overhaul in June.

While the rally's numbers were not large, immigration policy advocates said it was very unusual for legal immigrants, traditionally cautious since their visa applications and their futures are in the hands of the federal government, to stage public protests. The immigrants, who are living in the United States on temporary student or high-skilled employment visas, said they were nearing despair with waits lasting as long as a decade to obtain visas giving them permanent residence, which are known as a green cards.

"When I heard about this rally I immediately made the decision to come," said Paul Wang, 37, a computer scientist from China who lives and works in Virginia. "I like the freedom and the safety in this country. I want to send a request signal to Congress to bring more efficiency to the process for us to get a green card."

Paul Donnelly, a consultant to American Families United, a legal immigrant advocacy group, who said he had been working on immigration policy in Washington for more than 25 years, called the rally "a genuinely new phenomenon." "It is a significant thing to have foreign-born people, who are notoriously hard to organize, organizing themselves," Mr. Donnelly said.

Since Congress reconvened this month, more and more calls have come for lawmakers to revisit the immigration issue by first fixing the foundering system for legal immigration. On Sept. 11 a bipartisan group of 13 governors, including those from the states with the largest immigrant populations, sent a letter to the leaders of Congress asking for increases in the number of temporary visas and green cards for highly educated immigrants.

Saying there was a "critical shortage" of professionals in math and the sciences, the governors wrote, "We must recognize that foreign talent has a role to play in our ability

to keep companies located in our state and country.” The governors included Arnold Schwarzenegger of California and Rick Perry of Texas, both Republicans; and Janet Napolitano of Arizona and Eliot Spitzer of New York, who are Democrats.

Despite soaring demand from immigrants and high-tech businesses, an annual limit of 140,000 on employment-based green cards has not been altered since 1990. A study published in August by the Kauffman Foundation of Kansas City, Mo., found that 1.1 million highly skilled immigrants and their family members were languishing in backlogs in 2006, waiting for green cards. Temporary visas for immigrants with special skills, known as H1B visas, are limited to 65,000 a year, plus 20,000 visas for immigrants who earn advanced academic degrees in the United States.

The Kauffman study reported that some immigrant professionals were becoming discouraged by the prospect of bureaucratic delays. One in three new, skilled immigrants working here said they were uncertain whether they would remain, according to the study, conducted by researchers from Harvard, Duke and New York University. This raised the possibility of reverse brain drain, as immigrants who came to the United States for advanced studies might decide to return to their home countries.

The immigrants at the rally were clearly committed to staying in the United States, pausing from their speeches to listen to one of their leaders sing “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Dr. Sridhar Narra, 34, a physician born in India, said his effort to gain a green card had lasted almost eight years, including a two-year forced separation from his wife, also from India. After coming to the United States in 1999, Dr. Narra has practiced medicine under a special visa for doctors who serve in areas where medical personnel are scarce. He has worked with low-income and uninsured patients at a clinic in Benton Harbor, Mich., fulfilling a five-year requirement, and applied for his green card two years ago.

“I’ve been waiting, law abiding, tax paying,” Dr. Narra said. “How long is long enough?”

Temporary immigrants who want green cards must obtain a Labor Department certification that no American workers are available for their jobs. It can take more than a year to get that certification. And in a June report, the ombudsman for Citizenship and Immigration Services, the agency that handles green card applications, found that more than 100,000 F.B.I. background checks of immigrants, also part of the application, had been in process for more than a year.