

White House has new plan for immigration

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Story Highlights

- Plan would grant three-year work visas
- To be permanent U.S. residents, immigrants would have to leave country, apply
- 11 million to 12 million illegal immigrants in U.S.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- A White House plan devised in weeks of closed-door meetings with Republican senators would grant work visas to undocumented immigrants but require them to return home and pay hefty fines to become legal U.S. residents.

The draft immigration legislation is the first stab by the White House and Republican senators this year at addressing the presence of 11 million to 12 million illegal immigrants living and working in the country and employers' reliance on illegal workers.

The White House draft plan was circulating Thursday around Capitol Hill and among groups with an interest in immigration legislation after elements of it were leaked late Wednesday.

Under the plan, undocumented workers could apply for three-year work visas, which the plan dubs "Z" visas. They would be renewable indefinitely but renewal would cost \$3,500 each time.

The undocumented workers would have legal status with the visas, but to get a green card, making them legal permanent residents, they would have to return to their home country, apply at a U.S. embassy or consulate to re-enter legally and pay a \$10,000 fine.

The plan also tries to make border security a priority by requiring 18,300 Border Patrol agents and 370 miles of physical fencing be in place, as well as electronic monitoring of the southern border ongoing before a temporary worker program could start.

The plan is far more conservative than the one the Senate approved last year with bipartisan backing and support from President Bush. That plan, whose principal architects were Sens. John McCain, R-Arizona, and Edward M. Kennedy, D-Massachusetts, allowed illegal immigrants to stay in the U.S., work and apply to become legal residents after learning English, paying fines and back taxes and clearing a background check.

Critics dismissed that bill as an amnesty.

Supporters of immigration reform say the draft plan shows the White House is serious about getting a bill completed this year. But immigration advocates were disappointed with the product and see it as a step backward.

"For us it's a no go," said Angela Kelley, deputy director of the advocacy group National Immigration Forum.

The plan goes too far for some conservatives.

"Offering illegal immigrants guaranteed long-term and legal status will send the wrong message to the millions of people around the world looking to come to the United States," said Rep. Brian Bilbray, a California Republican who heads the House Immigration Reform Caucus. The caucus supports tougher immigration laws.

A plan to make more green cards available to skilled workers by limiting visas for parents, children and siblings of U.S. citizens and one that would prohibit temporary workers from bringing family members is one of the plan's more controversial provisions.

"President Bush said family values don't stop at the Rio Grande. Evidently they do," said Kevin Appleby, director of Migration and Refugee Policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Kennedy appeared at a news conference in support of immigration reform with evangelical leaders, including Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty. The leaders said they plan to exhort their congregations to push lawmakers and take other steps to get an immigration reform bill passed.

Family unification, said Kennedy, "has been an essential aspect of immigration policy since the history of this country" and letting immigrants work their way toward legalization is a framework for previous immigration bills that has received substantial support.

"You don't compromise on the morality of these issues," Kennedy said. "We're not going to."

But Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said he favored gearing immigration toward the higher skilled and educated who he said would help the country.

The immigration plan is the result of about a month of meetings among White House officials, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez and Republican senators.

Democrats recognize they need Republican support to get an immigration bill passed this year and have been counting on Bush to deliver Republican votes.

A House bill introduced last week by Reps. Luis Gutierrez, D-Illinois, and Jeff Flake, R-Arizona, also attempts to appeal to conservatives.

It provides six-year work visas to undocumented immigrants and requires them at some point during that period to exit the country and re-enter using their work visa.