

## Bill could help, hurt immigrants waiting for green cards

By SUSAN CARROLL, HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Nanfei Sun, a 40-year-old software engineer from China, applied for a green card more than five years ago, promising himself that once it was approved, he would get married, sink in roots and build the life he'd dreamed of in America.

Sun waited, patiently at first, as the years passed and as he crept slowly forward in a staggering backlog of employment-based green card applications. His resentment grew slowly, he said, as his world started to close in on him.

Traveling could jeopardize his temporary visa status, so there were no trips home to see his aging parents in China or to bring home a future wife. He stalled for years before buying a home in the West Memorial area, fearing he could be forced to leave the U.S. immediately if he was laid off and lost his legal status.

"The longer I stay in the U.S., the more frustrated I feel because of my status," Sun said.

Congress appears to be hearing the frustration shared by Sun and scores of high-skilled legal immigrants in the U.S., and, in a rare showing of bipartisanship on the divisive immigration issue, is trying to reduce the often decades-long backlogs that legal immigrants from many countries face.

The [U.S. House of Representatives](#) on Nov. 29 passed a bill that would remove a cap limiting any individual country from claiming more than 7 percent of the 140,000 employment green cards issued annually. That cap has led to lengthy backlogs for immigrants from countries that have a high demand for the visas, such as China and India (population 1.2 billion), which have had the same number of green cards available as smaller countries such as Iceland (population 300,000.)

The legislation is backed by many technology companies, the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) and several pro-immigration groups.

### *Small nations nervous*

Despite sailing through the House with a 389-15 vote last month, the bill has been blocked from moving forward in the Senate by Sen. [Charles Grassley](#), R-Iowa. He prevented it from moving forward amid concerns that it "does nothing to better protect Americans at home during this time of record unemployment."

The proposed changes also have raised concerns among immigrants from other countries across the globe, who will be forced back in the queue if the cap is removed. Since the legislation does not increase the number of green cards, the bill will redistribute the backlog and may increase the

wait times for smaller countries, while shortening the lines for the big countries with pent-up demand.

"This bill will push us back because India and China want to get there first," said [S.M. Haleem](#), a database administrator who lives in Stafford and has been waiting for more than five years to get his employment-based green card.

Haleem had similar complaints to Sun, from China, about how the long wait for a green card has impacted his life.

He hasn't been home to Bangladesh in 15 years, he said. Even if another company makes him a better offer, he could not change jobs since his green card application is through his current employer. He'd like to start his own business and invest here, he said, but has been cautioned against it in case his green card does not come through.

"Mostly, it's the peace of mind," he said. "You wake up every day in the morning and wonder, 'What is going to happen tomorrow?'"

***'I do not have security'***

Houston immigration attorney [Gordon Quan](#) said a better solution is to raise the 140,000 annual cap on employment green cards, though that is unlikely to gain traction in Congress with the U.S. unemployment rate hovering near 9 percent. He warned that the U.S. is losing its competitive edge globally by not offering top talent a chance to permanently immigrate.

Sun, who has a doctorate in computer science from the [University of Houston](#), said he does not regret immigrating to the U.S., but is growing increasingly envious of his friends who opted to immigrate to Canada instead. He said they have moved through Canada's immigration system much faster and have long ago gained legal status, married, bought homes and started families.

"They are really settled down. For me, I am still a foreigner," he said.

"Without immigration status, I do not have security," he said. "Once people have security, they will invest, they will consume, and this will bring the country in the right direction."

Reporter [Yang Wang](#) contributed to this report.

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<http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Bill-could-help-hurt-immigrants-waiting-for-2401181.php>