

Corporate America Lobbies for Immigration Reform

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Business leaders want to see broad immigration reform this year, and they pledged on Thursday to put serious money behind that effort.

Carlos Gutierrez, a former commerce secretary under President George W. Bush, said that he's continuing to grow a Republican super PAC, which was first announced in November, designed to urge members of Congress to support immigration reform.

"We're going to do something we haven't done in the past," he said at a news conference. "We're going to put money behind the problem."

Gutierrez said the group is "getting paperwork together" right now, and that the goal of the super PAC will be to raise money to support immigration reform in critical districts. Per official rules, the super PAC won't be able to endorse specific people.

U.S. Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Thomas J. Donohue cited several priorities, such as legalization for undocumented immigrants, border security, a more flexible visa program and an enhanced employer verification system, for immigration reform at the conference. The ultimate goal, he said, should be allowing more immigrants to come to the U.S. to fulfill the needs of businesses.

"Even with high unemployment," he said, "we have millions of job openings that go unfilled. Either the workers come here to fill them or those jobs go somewhere else."

But how immigration reform takes shape in Congress remains an open question, and business leaders indicated they aren't taking a definitive stance on at least some core issues.

Both Gutierrez and Donohue insisted that the question over whether to offer a path to citizenship or a different form of legal status to the 11 to 12 million undocumented immigrants is less important than getting a broad immigration reform bill or bills passed. A pathway to citizenship is one of the most contentious elements of immigration reform, and many immigrant-rights groups have demanded that it be included in any legislation.

"The important thing is that they're legal," Gutierrez said.

Undocumented immigrants need a way to "come out of the shadows," Donohue added.

Gutierrez said the government isn't going to "round up 12 million people and kick them out," and they're also not going to "hand out free passports." The solution, he said, "is somewhere in the middle."

Donohue said that it "would be terrible" if legal status were given without the possibility of ever attaining citizenship, but "there's no question that what is needed immediately is legalization and a path to get [to citizenship] eventually."

Both men also said they aren't picky about whether reform comes in one big comprehensive bill or in several smaller chunks.

"I don't think we need to decide that now," Donohue said, adding that the emphasis should first be placed on building some consensus around reform ideas.

Keeping the focus on immigration has been a challenge, however, as issues such as the fiscal cliff and new gun laws have taken precedence in recent weeks.

Donohue said he thinks there are a growing number of Republicans in the House of Representatives who want to address the issue, but declined to provide specific names.

His staff has been working with a traditional foe: Richard Trumka, president of labor group AFL-CIO. Donohue said his organization has also met with religious leaders who view immigration as a humanitarian issue.

"I'm not worried about whether we can get the votes in the House," he said, "if we can get agreement" between business, labor, and faith-based organizations.

"Once we get that together," he added, "we'll get the votes."

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