Congress passes green-card bill for spouses of deceased U.S. citizens

Widows and widowers would now be eligible regardless of when their partners died or how long they were married. The measure awaits President Obama's signature.

By **Anna Gorman**

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Congress passed a bill Tuesday that would make widows and widowers of U.S. citizens eligible for green cards even if their spouses died before their applications were approved.

The measure, part of the more than $40-billion Homeland Security appropriations bill, ends the "widow penalty," which required couples to be married for two years before the surviving spouse would be eligible to apply for residency. Now, surviving spouses can apply for a green card for themselves and their children regardless of when the U.S. citizen died or how long they were married.

There are believed to be a few hundred cases affected nationwide, including that of Dahianna Heard, whose husband was fatally shot while working for a private security contractor in Iraq; Raquel Williams, whose husband died of sleep apnea and heart problems; and Ana Maria Moncayo-Gigax, whose husband was killed in a car crash while on duty with the U.S. Border Patrol. Many are fighting deportation, and others have already been deported.

"It was just something crying out to be fixed," said Brent Renison, who has been fighting to get the law changed since 2004. "These cases should have been approved."

Renison had fought the case in courts around the nation, including in Los Angeles, where a judge this year ordered the Department of Homeland Security to reopen the immigration cases of nearly two dozen people who were denied green cards because of the deaths of their spouses.

In June, the federal government announced that it would suspend deportation proceedings for two years so applicants could stay in the U.S. while resolving their legal status. But Renison said that didn't go far enough and continued to push Congress to change the law.

The bill now goes to President Obama.