

Immigration compromise would unite torn-apart families

By Lisa Mascaro

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WASHINGTON -- As a comprehensive immigration overhaul stalls in the House, two border-state lawmakers introduced legislation Thursday that would tackle one aspect of the issue -- making it easier to unite American families split apart by past immigration law violations.

The effort from Rep. Beto O'Rourke (D-Texas) and Rep. Steve Pearce (R-N.M.) could provide common ground among Democrats and Republicans, an opportunity to ease into a debate over what to do with one subset of the estimated 11 million people living in the United States without legal status.

The legislation is significant because while most Republican lawmakers have resisted providing a pathway to citizenship to those in this country illegally, some have indicated they could support legal status for certain groups of immigrants snared by problems with the existing laws.

"I have long said that we should never split up families, and today's proposed law allows the careful and sensible evaluation of cases where American families have been wrongly separated, but still makes sure that our immigration laws are upheld," Pearce said.

The legislation would allow immigration officials to use discretion when granting waivers for those applying to be in the country with their American spouses, children and other family members.

Over the last five years, tens of thousands of immigrants who would otherwise qualify for legal status have been denied because of what O'Rourke called "minor" immigration law violations in their past. Some were brought to the country illegally as minors and never left, for example; others made false statements on entering the country. Many are deported or must return to their country for several years to apply for re-entry.

"This is an issue of fairness and standing up for U.S. citizen families," O'Rourke said. "I have heard countless heartbreaking stories of families in my district forced to live apart because of arbitrary laws with punishments that do not fit the actions and serve no public interest."

A comprehensive Senate-passed bill to overhaul the nation's immigration laws has flamed out in the House, though Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) is under pressure to bring legislation forward this fall as the GOP tries to improve its tattered relationship with Latino and minority voters.

Deep divisions among Republicans on the issue have prevented action, and Boehner has said the house would take a more piecemeal approach.

But any Republican effort is likely to need Democratic votes for passage, and Democrats are unlikely to give their support to GOP-backed measures for beefed-up border security and employment verification without some relief for those in the United States illegally.

Over the last week, three House Republicans, including Rep. Jeff Denham (R-Turlock) and Rep. David Valadao (R-Hanford) from California's Central Valley, [have signed on to a comprehensive House bill](#) that would support a citizenship pathway for immigrants in the United States illegally.

<http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/politicsnow/la-pn-immigration-bill-unite-families-20131031,0,3571850.story#axzz2jIjUWF4d>