

Immigration plan continues moving through Senate

Alan Gomez, USA TODAY 3:53 p.m. EDT May 16, 2013

Story Highlights

- Gang of Eight fought off attempts to significantly change its immigration bill
- GOP senators tried to speed up rollout of E-Verify program, but were rebuffed
- Senate committee will debate proposed pathway to citizenship next week

After a Senate committee finished poring through the enforcement sections of a sweeping immigration bill on Thursday, Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, didn't want to dwell on the three amendments he proposed that were voted down by his colleagues.

He has already been thinking of other ways to change the bill.

The core of the immigration bill, which was produced by a bipartisan group of senators known as the Gang of Eight, remained largely intact after the third hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee that is considering more than 300 amendments. Grassley said little had been accomplished to satisfy him and other Republicans who feel the bill doesn't do enough to secure the border and ensure that unauthorized immigrants can't find work in the U.S.

Grassley said he will try to bolster those provisions on the Senate floor and lobby House members working on their own version of an immigration bill.

"I had my day in court (today), and I'm going to have a lot of other days in court," said Grassley, the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee. "It's a long process. It'll be going on for the next six months, so you shouldn't be drawing any conclusions right now."

Grassley's disappointment was met by tempered enthusiasm from members of the Gang of Eight, and other pushing to pass the bill, which would allow the nation's unauthorized immigrants the chance to become U.S. citizens.

Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a group that supports the bill, said having four members of the Gang of Eight on the Senate Judiciary Committee — Republicans Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Jeff Flake of Arizona, and Democrats Charles Schumer of New York and Dick Durbin of Illinois — allowed them to fight off any amendments that would critically damage the bill.

"The Gang of Eight has held strong," Sharry said. "They've accepted a number of Republican amendments, but none of them undermine the core elements of the bill. The early threats — the poison pills, the delaying tactics, things that we thought might actually hurt the process — they've been overcome."

Much of Thursday's hearing focused on the E-Verify program, a computer-based system that allow business owners to check the immigration status of new hires against federal immigration databases.

The bill requires that all U.S. businesses use the program within five years, but Grassley filed an amendment to require all businesses to use it within 1.5 years. He argued that the program should be implemented as soon as possible to ensure that unauthorized immigrants don't continue sneaking into the country and finding work.

"The system is ready to go nationwide," Grassley argued.

But the amendment was voted down in part because of concerns over error rates that persist in the E-Verify program, which is currently being used by more than 400,000 employers. When U.S. citizens, people with green cards and foreigners with work visas are run through the system, less than half of 1% are flagged as ineligible to work.

Some on the committee, such as Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., said that figure may seem small, but it will grow rapidly as the program is rolled out for the 60 million working Americans who have to go through the system. And since they would then have to correct their records at a Social Security office — which are hard to get to in many parts of the country — Franken said the system needs to working even better before it goes nationwide.

Graham agreed, but said the program is necessary to convince enough Republicans worried about future waves of illegal immigration to vote for the bill.

"If you're going to get this issue resolved and prevent the third wave, I can't promise you you won't be inconvenienced," Graham said. "There's going to be some false positives. We're trying to make it better."

The committee is scheduled to resume hearing amendments on the bill Monday morning.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/05/16/senate-immigration-e-verify-hearing/2167151/>