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House Starts Immigration Reform Push

BY MICHAEL MCAULIFF

President Obama may be occupied with trying to salvage health reform today, but Brooklyn Rep. Yvette Clarke and other members of Congress are reminding him about another promise he made: finally securing immigration reform.

Clarke, along with Reps. Nydia Velazquez, Mike Honda, Luis Gutierrez and Lynn Woolsey are introducing today their bill entitled "Comprehensive Immigration Reform for America's Security and Prosperity," or CIR A.S.A.P., as they've dubbed it.

"What we intend to accomplish with this is to make good on the President's and (Homeland) Secretary (Janet) Napolitano's statement to take up comprehensive immigration reform in this Congress," Clarke told The Mouth.

She is quite aware that Congress and the White House are focused on health care, but like many progressives, for her, there's no time like the present. Especially since the political scene is all but certain to change next year.

"If you don't start, then you don't try," said Clarke, who makes the point that immigration reform is a huge issue for Caribbean and African immigrants, not just Hispanics. "We've got to begin this conversation in America. We've got to get it front and center."

Immigration reform failed in 2005 with the GOP in charge, and the President favoring it.

Clarke believes finally fixing the system would be an economic boon, providing a pathway for undocumented immigrants to come out of the shadows and pay more taxes, not to mention fines. She also points to the huge numbers of entrepreneurs who are immigrants.

A big goal of hers is reuniting families and removing the fear and uncertainty that troubles many of her constituents, their relatives and friends. And she thinks raising the tough issues will help heal some divides.

"How much longer can we go on with the level of stigma and, actually, the nativist anger that exists out there?" she said.

And she has no patience for the arguments already surfacing that it's a bad idea to legalize undocumented immigrants when unemployment is sky-high.

"Those scare tactics have been used generation after generation after generation," said Clarke, a member of the Homeland Security Committee who also argued security depends on being able to better track people in the country.

"We need to be able to look ourselves in the mirror and say in the 21st century we have fixed a broken system, a dysfunctional system."

Immigration reform opponents are already taking aim at the bill.

"People feel shocked and completely betrayed that any elected official would propose legalizing illegal immigrants, stopping local police from enforcing immigration law, and stopping increased border security when we have over 15 million Americans out of work," said William Gheen of Americans for Legal Immigration PAC in a statement.

"The backlash on this bill is going to dwarf the rancor and contentiousness of the health care debate and for good reason," he said. "The current push for Amnesty is a prime example of how disconnected Washington has become from the views and opinions of average Americans."

Sen. Chuck Schumer is supposed to be the point man for immigration reform in the Senate. Clarke says she plans to talk to him soon and send him a letter.

"We welcome all efforts to move immigration forward," Schumer said. "We are working hard with Republicans in the Senate to craft a bipartisan bill that can pass over here. We're not there yet, but we're making good progress."

An interesting political subtext to the bill's offering today is that its prime sponsors are all members of the Hispanic, Black and Progressive caucuses, which have all had to take a back seat on lots of things this year, not least of which has been health care.