

Irish Americans lobby for immigration reform

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by [Natalie Craig](#)

More than 40 Irish Americans from across the country, including leaders from Illinois and Chicago, lobbied March 12 in Washington D.C. to urge Congress to implement comprehensive immigration reform.

The Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform and Irish-American delegates from 15 states asked Congress to consider immigration reform because the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which tightened immigration restrictions, has prevented many Irish people from immigrating to the U.S., said Ciaran Staunton, president of the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform.

“Closing the door on the [Irish people] who helped build America is wrong,” Staunton said. “The [people] that built railroads, police stations and churches. They are closing the door on them with one swipe of a pen.”

Illinois is one of the nation’s leading advocates for immigrant rights, and Chicago is among the most immigrant-friendly cities, said Billy Lawless, chairman of Chicago Celts for Immigration Reform.

There are currently 3,000–5,000 undocumented Irish immigrants living in Chicago and approximately 50,000 in the entire nation, Lawless said.

Hispanic immigrants have become the face of immigration reform, Lawless said; however, immigration reform impacts people of all nationalities.

“A lot of people think that it has always been just a Hispanic issue, when of course we know that it’s not,” Lawless said.

From 1820–1850, 5 million Irish immigrants came to the U.S., accounting for half of all immigrants at the time, according to a February 2008 report from the U.S. Department of State. By 1850, Irish immigrants made up one-fifth of Chicago’s population.

“This problem isn’t going away,” Lawless said. “It can’t be pushed under the carpet anymore. Something has to be done.”

Republicans have avoided immigration reform, Staunton said, but now is an ideal time for immigration leaders to engage in serious discussions about it because Republicans who have halted changes will have to adapt in response to resistance seen in past years, he said.

“Now is the time [Republicans] should deal with the issue because the more that it is put off, the more problems that will [ensue] for Republicans,” Staunton said.

However, many Republicans agree that the immigration system is flawed and changes need to be made, but the party is divided on the best way to solve the issue, said Andrew Welhouse, communications director for the Illinois Republican Party.

“There is not really one standard Republican view on immigration reform,” Welhouse said. “At a basic level, every Republican agrees that the immigration system in our country is broken and that there needs to be improvements.”

It is difficult to immigrate to the U.S., so some enter as tourists and then find a way to stay in America without legal permission, Staunton said.

Kristen Williamson, spokeswoman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, said such reform creates more barriers for unemployed Americans.

“When [citizens] are struggling to find jobs or put their kids through college, we do not need to open our labor market to immigration,” Williamson said. “The focus of Congress should be U.S. citizens and their ability to get jobs.”

Staunton said Irish immigrants are not the only ones suffering. He said the 48 million immigrants in the U.S. should band together to increase awareness of problems of the nation’s immigration system, such as allowing people from some countries to immigrate and not others.

“There is a consensus on Capitol Hill that the immigration system is broken,” Staunton said. “[Irish immigrants] aren’t better than anyone else, but we’re not worse than anyone else, and we can be part of working with all of the other groups. The time has come to sort this out.”

During the visit to Capitol Hill, Staunton and Lawless said they felt confident that every Republican in the House of Representatives knows there is an Irish dimension to immigration reform.

“A number of people said to us today, ‘We aren’t going to pass something that is 2,000 pages,’” Staunton said. “Well, pass something that’s 200 pages or 20 pages, but pass something that says, ‘Well, we are going to try.’”

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