

Labor, faith leaders oppose cuts to family immigration visas

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A coalition of labor and faith leaders said Wednesday that they would oppose any effort by senators working on a bipartisan immigration reform bill to make it more difficult for U.S. citizens to obtain visas for foreign family members to join them in the United States.

An eight-member bipartisan Senate group is apparently set to propose eliminating two categories of family visas – for brothers and sisters and married adult children of U.S. citizens – in a comprehensive legislative proposal to overhaul the nation’s immigration laws.

Under the plan, those family members could still apply for visas but would need other qualifications, such as advanced education and specialized work skills –to improve their chances.

Republicans said the plan would help balance the nation’s immigration policy by allowing more skilled workers to enter based on employment needs, while streamlining a backload of more than 4 million people across the world who have applied for family visas.

But some Democrats said such a proposal would run counter to the nation’s long-standing practice of welcoming extended families.

“Maintaining family reunification should be a central goal of our immigration policy,” AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said during a conference call with reporters Wednesday. He explained that his grandfather emigrated to the U.S., only to wait two years before being able to bring his wife and her mother to join him.

“That separation shouldn’t be allowed to happen to any family,” Trumka said. “That’s just not right. ... This is America. Separating families is not how we should do things. Not husbands, wives, children, or brothers and sisters. We’re a better country than that. Families should be able to stay together.”

The visa programs do not have to be a zero-sum game between employment and family needs, the labor and faith leaders said. They called on the senators to consider an alternative plan to clear the backload of family visa requests by using unclaimed visas from other categories that go unused each year, lift annual caps that govern spouses and minor children of legal U.S. residents who are not citizens and double the annual per country visa caps that limit the percentage of immigrants from each country to no more than 7 percent of the total who are allowed into the U.S.

“One thing we forget is that there is a social element to our immigration system,” said Kevin Appleby of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which supports an immigration overhaul. “We need to be mindful that family unity strengthens the social backbone.”

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