

Obama addresses immigration reform

By: **Josh Gerstein**

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President Barack Obama on Thursday managed to undo some of the damage he did recently with immigrants' rights advocates — who were angered when Obama said in Mexico that immigration reform would have to wait until after health care and energy bills passed Congress.

Obama dropped in on a White House meeting with more than 100 immigration reform backers — and the message, according to some who were there, was that Obama would push for immigration reform even as the health-care debate continues to unfold.

"I think he's more forward-leaning," said Angela Kelley, an immigration reform expert with the liberal Center for American Progress think tank. "The takeaway from Mexico was that this is just kicking the can down the road. The takeaway from today is they're rolling up their sleeves and leaning heavy into the issue."

There was no indication that the president set a timeline for reform, though he said he expected Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) to introduce and hold hearings on a major immigration bill this fall, participants said.

"He's doing this and health care. He didn't give an inkling that he's going to back away from immigration reform. I think he's ready to do the heavy lifting," said Kelley.

The session was officially hosted by Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, who has been sharply criticized by immigrant advocates in recent days for putting too much emphasis on enforcement and too little on reform legislation and making the immigration system more humane.

The meeting included advocacy groups, religious organizations, unions, employers and law enforcement. United Farm Workers Union President Arturo Rodriguez said participants delivered blunt messages to Napolitano that she needed to adjust her public message.

"Very frankly, one issue was that we want to make sure you're communicating the importance of immigration as much as you are communicating the importance of enforcement," Rodriguez said. "We are a nation of laws. We all understand that, but simultaneously we are a nation of immigrants as well that treats people with dignity and respect. We delivered that. I think she got that message loud and clear from everybody."

"I think the secretary realized that she needs to do a better job on behalf of the administration but also in a way that supports the House and Senate moving forward. That's significant," said Ali Noorani of the National Immigration Forum. "The proof is in the

pudding, and they're still making the pudding. There are lots of things the secretary can do in terms of administrative changes and a lot of leadership she can exert."

Participants said both Obama and Napolitano both brought up controversial arrangements under which local police partner with the federal government to enforce immigration laws. Critics have accused some local officials of using such deals to harass immigrants and, in some cases, U.S. citizens. Obama and Napolitano said local officials must be held "accountable" for their actions under the program, known as 287(g), attendees said.

The media was not allowed into the meeting, but Napolitano later issued a written statement emphasizing her commitment to reform.

"Today's meeting on comprehensive immigration reform was an important opportunity to hear from stakeholders and build on the significant time I've spent on the Hill meeting with members of Congress on this critical subject. I look forward to working with President Obama, my colleagues in Congress and representatives from law enforcement, business, labor organizations, the interfaith community, advocacy groups and others as we work on this important issue," she said.

A spokesman for Obama, Nick Shapiro, said Obama's message has not wavered.

"The President understands our nation's immigration system is broken and needs to be fixed, and that's why he asked Secretary Napolitano to work with stakeholders and Members of Congress to move the legislative process forward on this important issue. The President has consistently said we would begin work on comprehensive immigration reform this year, and that's what we're doing," Shapiro said in a statement.

Napolitano's office released a list of attendees at the meeting. The roster of employers invited was heavy with technology firms, such as Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Microsoft, and Oracle, who often press for visas to hire foreign citizens. Lower-wage employers such as McDonald's, Tyson Foods, and Wal-Mart also attended.

Noorani said he was pleased with the meeting, but wouldn't say immigration reform advocates are yet satisfied with the commitment Napolitano or the White House have shown on the issues.

Asked if they are now on the same page, he said, "At the time of the Inauguration, we were in the same book. At this point we're in the same chapter, but it's a long book — and we read at different speeds."