

# Obama plans push for immigration reform

Early next year, the administration will campaign for a comprehensive bill that could include a path to citizenship for 11 million people living illegally in the U.S.

December 07, 2012 | By Brian Bennett, Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — As soon as the confrontation over fiscal policy winds down, the Obama administration will begin an all-out drive for comprehensive immigration reform, including seeking a path to citizenship for 11 million illegal immigrants, according to officials briefed on the plans.

While key tactical decisions are still being made, President Obama wants a catch-all bill that would also bolster border security measures, ratchet up penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants, and make it easier to bring in foreign workers under special visas, among other elements.

Senior White House advisors plan to launch a social media blitz in January, and expect to tap the same organizations and unions that helped get a record number of Latino voters to reelect the president.

Cabinet secretaries are preparing to make the case for how changes in immigration laws could benefit businesses, education, healthcare and public safety. Congressional committees could hold hearings on immigration legislation as soon as late January or early February.

"The president can't guarantee us the outcome but he can guarantee us the fight," said Eliseo Medina, secretary-treasurer of the Service Employees International Union, which represents more than 2 million workers. "We expect a strong fight."

The focus comes amid new analysis of census data by the Pew Hispanic Center that shows illegal immigration is down and enforcement levels are at an all-time high.

Democratic strategists believe there is only a narrow window at the beginning of the year to get an initiative launched in Congress, before lawmakers begin to turn their attention to the next election cycle and are less likely to take a risky vote on a controversial bill.

"It's going to be early," said Clarissa Martinez de Castro, director of civic engagement and immigration for the National Council of La Raza. "We are seeing it being organized to be ready."

The White House declined to discuss its possible strategy while still embroiled in the year-end battle over taxes and spending cuts.

"Our focus is on the fiscal cliff," said a White House official who requested anonymity to discuss the matter.

The official pointed to the president's remarks at a postelection news conference, in which Obama said he would turn to immigration very soon after the inauguration.

But Republicans, including some who are in favor of immigration change, are pushing a go-slow approach. Rather than working on one comprehensive bill, Congress should pass a series of bills that help foreign entrepreneurs, technology workers, agricultural workers and those who were brought to the U.S. unlawfully as children, said Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who is the highest-profile Republican Latino politician and is expected to be an important GOP voice on immigration.

Small parts of the immigration issue should be tackled before addressing how to create a pathway to legal status for most illegal immigrants in the U.S., Rubio said Wednesday.

"Portions of immigration reform can be dealt with quicker than others," he said.

In conversations with congressional offices, White House officials have said the president would be "all in" on the issue and would want to push for a broad bill. But officials have not been specific about exactly how the president will use the bully pulpit or whether immigration will be a showpiece of the inaugural speech on Jan. 21 or the State of the Union address in early February.

One of the key strategic moves still being decided is whether or not the White House sends Congress a piece of legislation or lets lawmakers take the lead in writing the bill. Republican challenger Mitt Romney criticized Obama during the campaign for not presenting a bill to Congress despite promising to pass an immigration initiative in his first term.

One option is to dust off more than 300 pages of draft legislative language for a large immigration bill that went through a time-consuming Cabinet-level review in 2010 and was quietly handed to members of the Senate.

The 2010 initiative, led by Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), died in back-room negotiations when it was clear the senators couldn't muster the votes to get it passed.

The draft language creates a renewable visa for illegal immigrants already in the U.S. and allows them to eventually get in line for a green card after they submit to background checks, learn English and pay back taxes and a fine. The proposal also would require employers to use a federal database to check workers' immigration status, among other provisions.

Some lawmakers prefer that the White House not dictate the terms of the bill and leave the hard negotiations to an informal group with representatives from both parties as a way to avoid a contentious ideological fight in the committees, said two congressional staffers who were not authorized to speak publicly about the discussions.

A bipartisan group of six senators met behind closed doors in the Capitol for 30 minutes on Tuesday night for what is expected to be the first of many meetings on how to get a version of

the immigration bill through Congress. On the Republican side, the newly elected junior senator from Arizona, Jeff Flake, joined longtime immigration reform advocates Graham and John McCain of Arizona for the talks. The Democrats were Schumer, Robert Menendez of New Jersey and Richard J. Durbin of Illinois.

But Angela Kelley, an immigration expert with the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank in Washington, believes that Obama will have to step into the limelight, as he has over budget negotiations, to get something done on immigration.

"The congressional conversation has started," Kelley said. "It isn't something [Obama] can take his time on because the cameras and the microphones will be on him asking, 'What are you doing about it?' and he will have to have a ready answer."

<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/07/nation/la-na-immigration-20121208>