

# Senators aim to reach bipartisan immigration deal next week

By Thomas Ferraro

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(Reuters) - Eight senators aim to cap months of talks next week with a comprehensive deal to overhaul the U.S. immigration system, a member of the bipartisan group said on Thursday.

Democratic Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, a longtime reform advocate, said once the agreement is done, aides will draw up legislation that could be considered by the Senate Judiciary Committee in April.

"That's our goal," Menendez told Reuters. "We hope to agree on all of the major issues, hopefully, by the end of next week. But it could slip a bit," he said, perhaps by a couple of days or so.

"I'm not rigid about anything other than getting it right," Menendez said.

The timetable Menendez spelled out mirrored one that the group suggested earlier this year. It said it aimed to have a bill in March and a vote by the full Democratic-led Senate in June or July.

The eight senators - four Democrats and four Republicans - announced a "framework for comprehensive immigration reform" in January and have been working to flesh it out.

There are an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, many of them living in the shadows while seeking work and trying to avoid detection.

The eight senators have tried to draft a plan that would include a pathway toward U.S. citizenship for undocumented immigrants while strengthening border security.

They also want to create a more effective system to guard against U.S. employers hiring undocumented immigrants, and develop a program to better forecast and meet future U.S. workforce needs in a bid to curb illegal immigration.

The eight senators came together shortly after the November 2012 election results reflected the growing power of Hispanic voters and their pleas for immigration reform.

"There have been hard and tough negotiations, but it has been done all in the spirit of achieving the goal, in which compromise has been made on both sides," Menendez said.

The senators have worked with the encouragement of the White House and reached out to members of the Republican-led House of Representatives.

This week Obama met separately with Republican and Democratic lawmakers, mainly to talk about budget deficit concerns. But immigration reform also was discussed.

On Wednesday, Obama told a closed-door meeting of Senate Democrats that immigration was "something that we can get done," Democratic Senator Benjamin Cardin of Maryland said.

On Thursday, Republican Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona, a member of the group of eight, said he thanked Obama for "playing a role that's behind the scenes."

Flake said the issue of future immigration to the United States is a sticking point for Democrats, and that Obama could build support for that part of the pending immigration bill.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-usa-congress-immigration-idUSBRE92D1B120130314>