

# Sides reach broad agreement on immigrant guest workers

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**Washington (CNN)** -- Business and labor negotiators working to hammer out a deal on an immigrant guest worker program have reached broad agreement, a source familiar with the talks said Saturday, eliminating one major hurdle to legislation revamping the nation's immigration system.

Business leaders and labor groups had been working to develop a plan on guest workers, tackling major sticking points on how much workers would be paid and the number of workers that would be allowed into the country each year.

Labor unions influencing the talks, including the AFL-CIO, argued for higher pay and fewer workers per year, since they are concerned about the effect guest workers would have on American workers.

Groups such as the Chamber of Commerce have pushed for guest workers to be paid the same as American workers, depending on their training and experience.

The source said the agreement would allow for the creation of a new "W" visa for lesser-skilled workers not working in agriculture. Those workers would be allowed to enter based on labor market shortages, and would be permitted to come into the United States with the intention of applying for permanent residency.

According to the source, the "W" visa would affect housekeepers, landscapers, retail workers and some construction workers. The agreement does not address visas for high-skilled workers; visas to bring in family members; or visas for agriculture workers.

According to the AFL-CIO's understanding of the agreement, the "W" visa program would begin April 1, 2015. The number of visas issued would never go below 20,000 per year and would be capped at 200,000 annually during times of high employment.

One third of the visas would be reserved for businesses that employ fewer than 25 people, while no more than 15,000 visas per year would go to construction workers, the AFL-CIO said.

The labor union indicated that in its understanding, the new program would not adversely affect the wages of American citizens, and that companies taking advantage of the "W" visas would be required to also recruit U.S. workers.

Guest workers would be paid a wage similar to American workers with the same level of experience, according to the AFL-CIO's understanding.

A new government department, the Bureau of Immigration and Labor Market Research, would determine specific industries with labor shortages and make recommendations to Congress. The agency would also play a role in setting an annual cap for "W" visas. The AFL-CIO said the bureau would fall under the existing U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and its director would be appointed by the president and confirmed by Congress.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-New York, one of eight senators who signed onto an immigration reform framework earlier this year, spoke with Thomas Donohue, president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce, about the new agreement, according to another source familiar with their conversation.

The Chamber of Commerce wrote in a statement Saturday that "the senators will make the decisions about any final agreements and what makes the best public policy overall."

Earlier this week, a source familiar with the congressional negotiations told CNN that the eight senators have tentatively reached agreement on some of the other thorny issues surrounding comprehensive immigration reform, such as a path to citizenship and metrics for securing the border.

Sources spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not allowed to speak on the record.

President Barack Obama has made immigration reform a top priority of his second term in office, and a White House official said Saturday the president "continues to be encouraged by progress being made by the bipartisan group of senators."

"We look forward to seeing language once it is introduced, and expect legislation to move forward as soon as possible," the official said.

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/30/politics/immigration-guest-workers/index.html>