

To Cope With Child Immigrants, Competing Plans Emerge From Congress

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Divergent plans are now emerging from the House and Senate on how best to deal with the influx of unaccompanied children from Central America across the border.

Though both would offer the president less money than he asked for to deal with the crisis, a major battle has developed over whether to amend a 2008 law that makes it harder to speedily deport the children.

House Republicans are drawing a clear line in the sand on this one: President Obama is getting no money from them if they can't attach some policy changes to the funding. House Speaker John Boehner says the White House is going about this crisis all wrong.

"What the president's asking for is a blank check," he says. "He wants us to just throw more money at the problem without doing anything to solve the problem."

Republicans in the House say solving the problem means changing a 2008 anti-human trafficking law that now prevents immediately deporting anyone from countries other than Mexico or Canada.

The White House has said it's open to amending the law, but many Democrats for weeks have been drawing their own line in the sand. The law must stand, they say — and that's why more than half of the funds in the bill written by Sen. Barbara Mikulski, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, will go to the Department of Health and Human Services.

"We need to be able to do this in order to house the children while their legal and refugee status is being determined," she says.

Overall, the Senate bill would give the president \$2.7 billion to handle the border crisis — a billion less than Obama requested. But House Republicans say the Senate is still giving away too much.

"If, on the other hand, we change that law, so we can turn those people away, then HHS would not need this huge, big increase in funding," says Hal Rogers, chair of the House Appropriations Committee.

Rogers estimates that immediately deporting most of these children would save the country \$1.3 billion, so he's preparing a bill that would give the president about \$1.5 billion in emergency funds for 2014.

And Republicans say those in President Obama's administration who know best seem to agree with them on the 2008 law. Rep. Kay Granger of Texas led a GOP group down to Honduras and Guatemala a week and a half ago.

"When we were in those countries, the State Department people and the people that we have there in those countries that work for us, work for our government, said that law needs to be changed," he says.

Granger's group came up with other proposals as well, including deploying the National Guard to free up border agents, bringing in temporary immigration judges to deal with the backlog, and even conducting immigration proceedings by videoconference to speed things along.

But Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama says to forget all that, and to instead buy these kids one-way tickets straight home — now.

"It costs about \$300 per ticket one-way, commercial air. That tallies up to \$27 million total," he says. "To spend billions of dollars on foreign children — money that we don't have, that we have to borrow to get, that we can't afford to pay back, is financial insanity when you can solve the problem with as little as \$20 million to \$30 million."

Meanwhile, in the Senate, some of the diehards who have opposed changing the human trafficking law say they are open to a compromise. But Rep. Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, says he's not willing to take the drastic steps that Republicans seem to want.

"If they really want to take these kids and ship them back in five days without giving them ... at least have a decent right to claim asylum, no, I'm not going to change on that," he says.

No floor vote on the funding bills has yet been scheduled in either chamber. But both parties say they remain hopeful something will get done before Congress leaves town next week for the entire month of August.

In the coming days, it could come down to which side blinks first.

<http://www.npr.org/2014/07/23/334494659/to-cope-with-immigration-influx-competing-plans-emerge-from-congress>