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Texas lawmakers, immigration lawyers discuss impact of broken immigration system

Immigration lawyers from Texas and other states took their case to Capitol Hill on Thursday as they met with lawmakers and their staff to try to demystify certain assumptions on the country's immigration system. The lawyers also lobbied for changes in immigration law that they say could positively affect the nation's economy.

The group of Texas-based lawyers targeted exclusively Republican legislators. They met with Rep. Ted Poe of Humble, and members of the offices of fifteen more legislators including Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn, Reps. John Culberson of Houston, Lamar Smith of San Antonio and Blake Farenthold of Corpus Christi.

The lawyers addressed the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act; the costs, standards and alternatives to detention of unlawful immigrants; the deficiencies in the process of issuing visas to business developers and potential investors; and the enforcement of prosecutorial discretion – the authority of an immigration official to decide to what degree to enforce law against a person.

“There's a lot of misinformation that has been passed through the years about immigration, and it is because of that misinformation that they (politicians) can polarize immigration at the state level,” said Beatriz Trillos Ballerini, a Houston-based attorney. “We are here to share our real-world view of the immigration system.”

Lawyers said they tried to explain Poe and staff members from other Texas lawmakers that prosecutorial discretion, which is a relatively new practice within the immigration system, is not equivalent to amnesty because it does not grant permanent lawful status or work authorization to the immigrants.

The lawyers also explained how some investors with plans for starting or expanding businesses in Texas have opted to instead invest in Canada, Mexico and the Middle East because of the long delays in visa processing.

“There are a lot of positive things that immigrants are trying to do here. They're not trying to steal jobs from Americans,” said Houston-based attorney Gordon Quan. “And unless there are people advocating for immigration reform, they (lawmakers) are only going to hear the negative things.”

Poe and the representatives from other legislators seemed receptive to the immigration issues addressed during Thursday's meetings, the lawyers said. Still, the overall feeling among the attorneys was that the extremism plaguing Washington and the strong partisanship brought by an election year won't leave room for any substantial changes in the immigration system in the near future.

“People forget it, but we tried to remind them (lawmakers) that we are a nation of immigrants, that's the subtext of our message,” Trillos Ballerini said. “It's important that we never give up.”

<http://blog.chron.com/txpotomac/2012/03/texas-lawmakers-immigration-lawyers-discuss-impact-of-broken-immigration-system/>