White House Budget Boosts Immigration Enforcement

By Laura Meckler
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The White House budget blueprint seeks to beef up enforcement of immigration law by deporting people more quickly, hiring more immigration-law judges and expanding the e-Verify system that many companies use to check whether workers are in the U.S. legally.

The initiatives come at a time of intense pressure on the White House over a proposed overhaul of immigration law that has stalled in the GOP-led House. House Republicans say they aren't advancing the issue because they can't trust the Obama administration to enforce the law.

Immigration advocates argue the administration is already too aggressive in deporting people who would be eligible to stay under proposed legislation, which President Barack Obama supports.

In a move that is more symbolic than substantive, the budget plan makes a fresh pitch for an immigration overhaul and assumes in its calculations that it will be enacted, helping to reduce the deficit.

Specifically, the blueprint includes savings of $158 billion over 10 years that it attributes to an immigration overhaul, no matter its dicey prospects in Congress.

Those estimated savings are similar to that of the Congressional Budget Office, a nonpartisan scorekeeper, which last year estimated that Senate immigration legislation would save $175 billion over a decade by prompting labor-force expansion and boosting income- and payroll-tax collections.

The Democratic-led Senate passed its immigration legislation last summer, but the House hasn't acted. The issue is divisive within the Republican Party, with some believing legislation would reward people with legal status or other benefits after they broke U.S. law by entering the country or overstaying visas.

Politics are also at work, as some in the GOP say it is a bad idea to take up the issue in an election year, when the party wants to stay unified behind a strategy of drawing attention to the flawed rollout of the 2010 health law.

Without legislative action to aid those in the U.S. illegally, the administration has come under severe fire from immigration advocates to scale back deportations, which have been at record levels under Mr. Obama.

In a nod to those concerns, the administration is proposing a reduction in the number of immigration detention beds, from 34,000 to 30,539, at a savings of $184.8 million in one year.

Critics say the mandatory bed quota helps drive up deportations, and the administration said Tuesday that the lower number would be sufficient. But administration officials fully expect Congress to maintain the higher threshold.

The administration also proposes that Immigration and Customs Enforcement speed up deportation of those who are going to be removed from the U.S. and projects a savings of $199 million in one year. The document reiterates that the administration seeks to prioritize the removal of violent criminals, something some dispute.

The budget also proposes hiring 35 new judicial teams, which include an immigration judge, a judicial law clerk and a clerical assistant, to help alleviate a severe backlog. That would add to the 248 existing teams but falls far short of the 225 extra teams provided over three years in the Senate legislation, said Dana Leigh Marks, president of the National Association of Immigration Judges, who is also an immigration judge in San Francisco.

"Because 100 of the current corps of 248 is eligible to retire in 2014, we fear that 35 new [immigration judges] wouldn't even replace all we will lose this year," she said Tuesday.

The administration also said it wants a pilot program to "implement additional efficiencies in the immigration court system," but it didn't give details.

Separately, the budget plan proposes $124 million to "support, expand and enhance" the federal government's e-Verify system. It said the new money would bolster the system's fraud prevention and detection capabilities and expand the program. It didn't give details beyond suggesting an expansion of a self-check program where people can confirm the accuracy of government records about themselves.

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