



Advocates: Family reunification policy helps some migrants, but not enough

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A new immigration policy that makes it easier for people from four Central and South American countries to join family in the U.S. will help, but is still “far from” the migration solution needed, advocates said.

The Department of Homeland Security on Monday started the new family reunification policy for residents of Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Under the program, residents from those countries can seek to join relatives in the U.S. and remain here for three years while their visa application is processed.

The program is based on similar programs for Cubans and Haitians and is intended to relieve stress at the border by giving migrants an alternative to showing up at a border crossing or trying to cross the border illegally.

In a statement Friday, Homeland Security Secretary said that new programs provide “safe, orderly, and lawful pathways, combined with strong enforcement, is effective in reducing dangerous, irregular migration to the United States.”

Advocates said it is a step in the right direction – but a small step.

“It’s going to benefit certainly thousands of people, but in terms of it being some easy solution for people from these countries in order to come to the United States, it’s far from that,” said David Bier, associate director of immigration of the Cato Institute.

Homeland Security estimates that as many as 73,500 people hold an I-130 Petition for Alien Relative form, the first step to becoming eligible for parole under the family reunification policy: 32,600 Salvadorans, 17,400 Colombians; 12,800 Guatemalans and 10,700 Hondurans.

But the agency also said it does not expect to extend invitations to “all such nationals,” and stressed that applications will be approved on a case-by-case, discretionary basis.

The process begins with the State Department issuing an invitation to I-130 holders in the U.S., who must be citizens or lawful permanent residents. They can then petition to have family

members in one of those four countries approved for travel to the U.S., where they will be evaluated to see if they qualify for parole.

Beneficiaries must be outside the U.S., must meet medical and other requirements and cannot already have an immigration visa. Anyone who tries to enter the U.S. illegally after July 10 will be ineligible. Once in the U.S., beneficiaries can apply for authorization to work here while they wait for their visa application to be processed.

While it concedes that the policy will not reach all of those holding I-130s, and that successful applicants will still face years of waiting for a visa, DHS insists the program will ease the load at ports of entry and reduce incentives for illegal border crossing, making it harder for cartels to exploit migrants.

Opponents say the program is designed to avoid the “bad optics” of surging immigration, and merely shifts migrants from the border to other routes into the country.

“Clearly their objective, as I said, is to bring in as many people as possible, while avoiding the bad optics of people crashing the border or waiting across the Rio Grande,” said Ira Mehlman, media director for the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, an analyst for the Migrant Policy Institute, called it a “a good program to help families be able to reunite and to create better processing in a way that makes sense.” But he said it does not go far enough.

“We’ve seen a lot more Colombians and Salvadorans, for example, coming to the border than we did several years back,” he said. “That’s why this program really is not on its own enough to try to provide a significant alternative.”

Bier said the government could help families by expediting their applications, but that’s not likely under a program that is “throttling the number of parole approvals through this invitation process.” He also said that the discretionary nature of approvals under the program are a way for the government to restrict the number of people who get approved,

“Anyone who’s trying to get into this process right now is basically, you know, it’s a hopeless situation for them,” he said. “I mean they’re waiting many, many years before they will have a chance to get approved under this.”

Still, Ruiz Soto said, this program is a better alternative than what migrants currently face.

“The alternative to waiting in the country is never as good as being able to come to the United States and be able to wait here and be reunified with families,” he said. “Especially for these visas that tend to last years before they can be allocated.”