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Republicans want a return to workplace immigration raids

They say they'll use their new majority in the House to press for more aggressive enforcement without any path to legal status.

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Reporting from Washington

Deportations of illegal immigrants have reached new heights for two years running under President Obama, statistics show, but Republicans say they'll use their new majority in the House to press for more aggressive enforcement without any path to legal status.

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Republican lawmakers called on the Obama administration to return to the era of workplace raids to arrest illegal employees, an approach that contrasts sharply with the president's continued push to create a path to citizenship for "responsible young people" and deport only those illegal immigrants charged with serious crimes.

Deportations under Obama have reached new heights for two years running, statistics show, but Republicans said they would use their new majority in the House to press for more aggressive enforcement without any path to legal status.

Large-scale workplace arrests of illegal workers were hallmarks of the George W. Bush administration's approach in its final years. But two years ago Obama decided to shift enforcement efforts to focus on employers who knowingly hire illegal workers.

Arrests from worksite raids for immigration-related offenses, such as using a forged driver's license or a fake Social Security number, have dropped by 70% since the end of the Bush administration, when a series of large raids of factories and meatpacking plants received national media attention.

Because Democrats hold a Senate majority and Obama has veto power, the GOP cannot force a change in the enforcement policy.

But with illegal immigration likely to be a hot-button issue in the 2012 campaign season, House Republicans on the House Judiciary subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement plan to hold hearings to criticize an administration they claim allows illegal immigrants to take American jobs.

With unemployment over 9%, "it is hard to imagine a worse time to cut worksite enforcement efforts by more

than half," Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Texas), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said Wednesday. "Citizens and legal immigrants should not be forced to compete with illegal workers for jobs."

The Republican move came a day after Obama, in his State of the Union address, called on Congress to "once and for all" address illegal of immigration — both border security and a path to legalization.

He said he was willing to work with Republicans and Democrats to "address the millions of undocumented workers who are now living in the shadows. I know that debate will be difficult. I know it will take time. But tonight, let's agree to make that effort."

Though workplace raids are high-profile and often receive media attention, they also are criticized as an expensive and unnecessarily traumatic approach to attacking the problem.

Some of the large-scale raids launched in 2007 and 2008 cost taxpayers upward of \$10 million, said one former law enforcement official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the debate.

"I was appalled at the raids," Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas) said Wednesday, referring to surprise raids that often involve large numbers of agents and local law enforcement. "In my district people were falling off ladders, pregnant women were falling. It was not effective."

Broad sweeps fill limited jail and court docket space the Obama administration wants to reserve for more hardened criminals, officials said. Each deportation costs the federal government about \$12,500, Immigration and Customs Enforcement Deputy Director Kumar Kibble told lawmakers Wednesday.

Instead, targeting employers is part of an effort by the administration to thwart illegal immigration by reducing the demand for illegal jobs, which draws hundreds of thousands across the border each year to look for work.

"There is a laser-like focus on holding employers accountable. In the final analysis, they are the ones supplying the jobs. It is the greatest use of the resources," Kibble said.

Under Obama, cases against employers are up sharply: Immigration and Customs Enforcement quadrupled the number of employer audits after Obama took office, increasing the number of inspections and arrests against those who knowingly hire illegal immigrants. Businesses were fined \$6.9 million in fiscal 2010, up from \$675,000 in 2008.

The debate over immigration enforcement comes at a time when the administration has hired more Border Patrol agents and deployed 1,200 National Guard troops to the U.S.-Mexico border over the summer to bolster efforts to stop illegal entry.

The Obama administration deported 392,862 illegal immigrants in fiscal 2010, according to ICE figures, a 6% increase over the 369,221 removed from the country in 2008.

More than 195,000 criminals were deported in 2010, a 70% increase over 2008 in the forced removal of immigrant criminals.

The number of illegal immigrants coming into the U.S. is declining, according to a report released in September by the Pew Hispanic Center.

Based on census and labor statistics, the Pew report found that roughly 300,000 illegal immigrants crossed the border annually between 2007 and 2009, down from about 850,000 annually from 2000 to 2005. It is unclear if the decrease is a result of a sagging economy that reduced demand for labor or stepped-up enforcement efforts — or perhaps both.

"If we continue with just enforcement only, I think we will be here for years and years dealing with the same problem," said Daniel Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. "It is simple supply and demand. We have demand for these workers and the supply of American workers to fill these jobs is shrinking."

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