

# Cronkite News

## **Immigration advocates push to keep focus on comprehensive reform**

By: Pei Li- October 3, 2013

For weeks, advocates have pushed to keep the issue of immigration reform in front of the public, during the debate over Syria, during the budget impasse, during the government shutdown.

They have rallied, protested and gotten arrested in a coordinated campaign to pressure Congress to act on a comprehensive reform bill that has been stalled in the House for months.

That campaign peaks this weekend with rallies around the country, including six in Arizona, just days after House Democrats unveiled a bill they hope will jump start the process.

“It was by design, and you will see more picking up, you will see more escalating pressure,” Mehrdad Azemun, of the Fair Immigration Reform Movement, said of the campaign.

Advocates planned 177 events in more than 150 cities Saturday, which they are calling the National Day for Dignity and Respect. Dawn Le, deputy campaign manager of Alliance for Citizenship, one of the organizing groups, said the day aims to pressure House leaders to move on immigration reform.

But one expert thinks their aim is off.

“Rallies and protests will have almost no effect on this entire process, because the battle line and disagreements are not being fought out on protests on the street,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst for the Cato Institute.

“These are policy debates that people are having in the media, in the halls of Congress, and Washington, D.C., think tanks and elsewhere,” said Nowrasteh. He said rallies will have “very little impact on the process going forward.”

The Senate in June passed a sweeping immigration reform bill that includes a pathway to citizenship for immigrants in this country illegally. It also calls for improved work visa options for low-skilled workers, including an agricultural worker program, and it requires that the border be secured before many of the other provisions can take effect.

The “Gang of 8” bill – named for the four Democratic and four Republican senators behind it, including Arizona GOP Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake – was backed by labor and business groups and passed with bipartisan Senate support on a 68-32 vote.

But it has stalled in the House, which Speaker John Boehner has said will not be rushed into acting on the Senate bill. The House, instead, has considered a number of smaller immigration bills that include parts of the Senate package.

Laura Vazquez, senior immigration legislative analyst at the National Council of La Raza, said she believes “the votes are there” to pass immigration reform in the House – if they can get a vote. Vazquez said supporters believe they have the 218 votes needed “based on the Democrats that have already been supportive and have said publicly that they would vote in favor of the immigration reform legislation, and the number of Republicans that supported it as well.”

Azemun said rallies like this weekend’s seek to pressure House leaders into letting the issue go forward. He noted that 26 House Republicans have announced support for a pathway to citizenship, and said more Republicans are showing support privately.

While the House has been considering four separate bills, 121 House Democrats on Wednesday introduced a bill that mimics much of the Senate bill, but strips out the tough border-security language.

The Senate called for \$46.3 billion in new border spending, to hire 20,000 additional Border Patrol agents and build 700 more miles of Southwest border fence, among other measures, according to a Congressional Budget Office analysis.

Advocates see hope in the Democrats’ bill, but Nowrasteh said it is “not a serious bill that they are going to debate.”

Nowrasteh said he is confident a comprehensive immigration reform bill can pass once “a serious bill is introduced to the House and debated,” but that the Democrats’ bill is little more than a way for Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi to nudge Boehner on the issue.

Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, said that even if the votes are there in the House as a whole, “nothing is going to pass the House without the majority of the majority.” She called the Democratic bill a “naked political move” by Pelosi, and said the House should consider reform in the smaller bits Boehner proposed.

Jacoby did not rule out action on immigration reform, even in the face of the government shutdown, as Republicans might “have the appetite to vote on something and solve the problem.”

Nowrasteh said addressing immigration now could give Congress an image boost.

“The public thinks the Congress is being lazy because of the shutdown,” he said. “This is an opportunity for a lot of Republicans to introduce the immigration reform bill to show the American people that they are working on this issue, that they are not sitting out the government shutdown and getting paid, but they are actually working.”

Despite the shutdown, advocates say something needs to be done now.

“We know that the Congress is occupied now and has a lot on its plate, but the immigration issue has to be dealt with,” said James Garcia, spokesman for Promise Arizona. “Thousands of people are separating from their families and getting more desperate the further we go along.”

And advocates are determined. Azemun said that when people ask him what plan B is, he responds that “there is no plan B. Plan A is organize, organize, organize, and we will continue.”

“This movement is over 15 years old, it is incredibly vibrant now,” he said. “It’s not going anywhere, we will continue going.”