

Roll Call

Trump announces temporary suspension of green cards

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President Donald Trump announced Tuesday that he planned to suspend, for at least 60 days, issuing green cards to many immigrants who want to live and work in the United States on a permanent basis.

The suspension would put “unemployed Americans first in line for jobs while America reopens,” he said during his daily coronavirus task force press conference.

“A short break from new immigration, depending on the time we're talking about, will protect the solvency of our health care system and provide relief to jobless Americans,” he said.

Trump said an executive order that would direct his administration to roll out this policy change was “being written right now, as we speak” and would be ready for signing Wednesday.

Trump noted he had teased his plan in a 10 p.m tweet Monday that said he would “temporarily suspend immigration” into the United States, suggesting that foreigners could bring the virus into the country and displace U.S. workers distressed from the pandemic-induced economic crisis.

His tweet offered no details about what policy changes the move would entail and blindsided congressional staff and even some Homeland Security officials. It also induced panic among visa workers and green card holders already in the United States, as well as some people currently abroad waiting for extensions, renewals and other paperwork to come through. Many such people have spent years in the United States, along with thousands of dollars on legal paperwork.

The details Trump announced Tuesday evening were not as all-encompassing as he suggested a night earlier. They may still affect thousands of people, however.

In fiscal 2019, roughly 1 million people obtained green cards, half of which were new arrivals to the United States. The other half were people who transitioned to permanent residency from within the country. On Tuesday, Trump suggested there may be exceptions for certain types of applicants, but he didn't elaborate.

Trump's tweet had initially raised concern that his order might also target certain temporary workers who come on "non-immigrant visas," such as health care workers, tech employees and agricultural workers. On Tuesday, the president said the forthcoming order would not affect such people. He did, however, acknowledge that a secondary order that might address those groups was under consideration.

The U.S. president has expansive power to restrict immigration, especially in the public safety and national security interests of the nation. However, "blanket bans" like those previously imposed by the Trump administration and the latest one being proposed "are akin to closing the barn door after the horse has escaped," Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said in a statement prior to Tuesday's briefing.

"Most research on travel bans in response to pandemics finds that they don't limit the spread of diseases, in part because they are always imposed after the disease has spread," he said.

Jeh Johnson, former Homeland Security secretary during the Obama administration, also criticized Trump's latest immigration crackdown.

"The first impulse and the last impulse can't always just be to stop immigration to prevent a public health disaster that is already here within our borders," he said at a virtual public forum, adding he was certain that the announcement came "without a lot of planning."

There are currently more than 816,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, in the United States — the most of any nation by far. The United States also has the most confirmed COVID-19 related deaths at more than 43,000 people, according to a global tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Restricting immigration was the central pillar of Trump's policy platform even before he was elected, and the crisis ushered in by the coronavirus pandemic has allowed the president to implement policies he had not been able to before, he recently told reporters.

"We've had this problem for decades," he said in a March 20 press conference. "You know the story. But now ... with the national emergencies and all of the other things that we've declared, we can actually do something about it."

But Trump denied he was using the pandemic as a way to escalate his immigration agenda when asked Tuesday, saying his priority was to protect American jobs.

Trump's reelection campaign suggested otherwise. It sent out an email Tuesday to supporters with a survey asking for their input on the impending order, and said it was "crucial to the president's next step."

Since the pandemic began, the Trump administration issued proclamations to temporarily suspend all travel from China, Iran and later, several European countries heavily affected by the coronavirus. This was in addition to the 13 countries it has already subjected to restrictions through his travel ban.

The Trump administration also announced in late March restrictions on nonessential travel at the northern and southern U.S. border. It also ordered all migrants coming to the border without papers — including asylum seekers and unaccompanied children — be returned. Within the last month, more than 11,000 migrants have been summarily expelled without going through the typical processes that let them legally file for asylum or other protections, a violation of U.S. and international refugee law, experts say. The administration on Monday extended both the travel and asylum restrictions through at least April 30.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency, which adjudicates visas, green cards and other applications, has shuttered offices abroad, already slowing down various types of processing. In the United States, the agency closed its offices in March due to coronavirus fears. It also suspended all asylum interviews and naturalization ceremonies that allow immigrants to cross the threshold into citizenship.

However, the administration has also moved forward with loosening rules around certain temporary work visas. The importance of farm workers to the labor market became even more stark during the pandemic, even as it became more difficult to recruit this foreign labor. Last week, the Department of Homeland Security announced it would allow farmers facing delays in getting approvals for foreign agricultural labor to hire farm workers already holding H-2A visas and in the United States.

“The farmers will not be affected by this at all,” Trump said Tuesday. “If anything, we're going to make it easier and we're doing a process that will make it better for those workers to come in to go to the farm where they've been for a long time.”

Many Republicans expressed support for the forthcoming order, including Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., who called it “common sense” in a tweet.

But advocacy groups and Democratic lawmakers quickly condemned Trump’s announcement as a move to further scapegoat immigrants for the pandemic and the resulting economic fallout. Tom Perez, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said in a statement that the president couldn’t “go five minutes without blaming someone else for his failures. First it was Obama and Nancy Pelosi. Now it’s immigrants.”

“Now that he’s seen the suffering and destruction caused by his lack of leadership, he needs a scapegoat. And immigrants have always been a favorite target of weak and xenophobic men like Donald Trump,” Perez said.