



House panel advances immigration changes, pushing back on Trump administration policies

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House lawmakers are pushing back against Trump administration immigration by forwarding legislation that would fund alternatives to detention for immigrant families, make credible fear of threats of gangs and domestic violence grounds for asylum and protect some "dreamers" from deportation.

The House Appropriations Committee approved the series of immigration amendments to its final Homeland Security spending bill for fiscal 2019 on a bipartisan basis.

"The House Appropriations Committee did something that the committee that's supposed to be dealing with immigration hasn't done in decades, which is pass meaningful immigration legislation," David Bier, an immigration policy analyst with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said.

The changes, approved and passed by the House Appropriations Committee, will have to be approved by the full House. The changes would have to be approved as a joint House-Senate bill approved by both chambers and finally signed by the president to take effect.

The House entered a five-week recess Friday, leaving just 11 legislative days before the end of the fiscal year.

The narrow time window to advance the bill could make Congress continue agency funding at current levels — without the amendments — in the next fiscal year, or having the House and Senate come together to create an omnibus spending bill, said Joshua Breisblatt, a policy analyst with the non-profit American Immigration Council, a Washington, D.C., advocacy group that studies immigration.

"I won't be surprised if it won't be done at the end of the fiscal year," Breisblatt said about the Homeland Security bill.

Immigrant families and unaccompanied children

Roughly 630 migrants — about half are women and children — arrived by bus in Puebla, Mexico, on April 7, 2018. They are staying in four shelters. Wochit

Among the amendments is a bipartisan measure that would advance funding for alternatives to detention for immigrant families, including \$7 million in funding for a family case management pilot program, and nearly \$10 million for medical and mental services for children and family in Department of Homeland Security facilities.

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Reps. Kevin Yoder, R-Ky., and Lucille Roybal-Allard, D-Calif., introduced the amendment, which passed the committee on a vote of 30-20.

The \$7 million for family case management accompanies an additional increase of \$28 million for alternatives to detention in the base bill. Alternatives, such as telephone monitoring, periodic check-ins at ICE offices, being released on bond or GPS monitoring, provide a way to ensure that people who aren't detained will participate in immigration court proceedings.

For 18 months in 2016 and 2017, a similar case management program served more than 630 families. The amendment calls for the pilot program to serve at least 1,000 families a year, on average.

“The family case management program was a highly successful program,” Roybal-Allard said during the July 25 committee meeting. “In fact, it had a 99 percent success rate of families attending their court proceedings.”

Yoder and Roybal-Allard's amendment acknowledges that Customs and Border Protection is developing plans for medical and mental health screening and referral services for facilities on the Southwest border, but prioritizes \$6 million for on-site provision for mental health services for children and their families.

“The Committee is concerned by the trauma that has been suffered by children and their relatives, including parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, entering into the United States, many of whom are fleeing violence,” the amendment reads.

Expanding the grounds for asylum

The committee adopted an amendment on a voice vote to expand asylum definition to include credible fear of threats of gangs and domestic violence.

That amendment, introduced by Rep. David Price, D-N.C., and passed on voice vote, specifically counters an action by Attorney General Jeff Sessions that declared gang and domestic violence are not grounds for asylum.

“Today marks a significant step in reversing one of the administration's most egregious immigration policies, and I'm proud to have the bipartisan support of my colleagues in this Committee,” he wrote in a statement.

Arizona Republic reporters explain the difference between seeking asylum at the border and attempting to immigrate illegally. Carly Henry, The Republic | azcentral.com

Protections for DACA recipients

Amid an uncertain future for young undocumented immigrants known as “dreamers” who came to the United States while they were young, Rep. Pete Aguilar, D-Calif., introduced two amendments to restrict federal funding for the deportation of beneficiaries of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, President Barack Obama's 2012 program that President Donald Trump has been trying to end.

Aguilar's two provisions passed on by voice vote. The first provision protected from deportation DACA recipients who have served in the U.S. military by not allowing the funding to carry out deportations. His second amendment protected DACA recipients who still meet eligibility requirements and are in “good standing.”

Guest worker visas

Two more committee-approved changes would amend the seasonal visas provided to immigrant workers, which also were approved on a voice vote.

The first amendment would change the H-2A seasonal agriculture worker program to a yearlong visa. The second amendment would reinstate a previous policy to not count returning workers within the annual cap for H-2B seasonal guest workers.

“Cows need to be milked all year round, there's no program right now that solves that problem,” Bier said.

“Farmers who face a shortage of agricultural labor have not been well served by the current H-2A program,” Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., said in a statement.

Newhouse introduced the H-2A amendment and cited that new farming methods and multiple harvests have shifted labor demands from merely seasonal.

“Seasonal to a yearlong visa, that's a huge change, it would greatly expand, if not more than double, the number of temporary workers who are coming in under those industries,” Bier said.

Clearing the high-skilled immigrant visa backlog

Yoder also introduced an amendment that removes a country cap for high-skilled workers that limits the number of employment visas issued by the United States to 7 percent for any one country.

The amendment is based on an existing bill, H.R. 392, which Yoder says has 75 percent of Congress' approval.

The policy does not increase the number of green cards that are available, but would distribute them in a first-come, first-served basis.

The next steps

Thursday is the last day the House is in session before an August recess. Yet, it remains unclear whether the Homeland Security bill will be taken up when the representatives return to session.

“I think it’s highly questionable whether these amendments ultimately become law or not,” Bier said. “The only hope is that you have an alliance between Democrats who want to see some of these changes happen and Republicans who want to see wall funding as well as making some important progress on immigration reform.”

The national security appropriations bill includes \$5 million for border wall construction, which may be a no-go for some Democrats.