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Md. Reaction to Immigration Reform Proposal Foreshadows National Debate

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Posted on October 19, 2009

By *TINA IRGANG*

WASHINGTON (Oct. 19, 2009) -- If the reaction from Maryland-area politicians, academic experts and advocacy groups to a new immigration reform proposal is any indication, the upcoming debate on the issue will be vehement and contentious.

The "compassionate, comprehensive" proposal from Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., includes a pathway to legalization for undocumented immigrants, rules for the humane treatment of immigration detainees, as well as a plan to appoint a commission which would adjust visa quotas based on employer needs.

Maryland Delegate Ana Sol Gutierrez, D-Montgomery, who is not related to Congressman Gutierrez, called the proposal "impressive."

"It's very aggressive and I think very clear in its commitments," Ana Sol Gutierrez said. "The path to legalization is definitely front and center, but also the other point of regularizing the future flow of immigrants so that we don't recreate a situation where people have to come without any documentation."

But her colleague, Delegate Patrick McDonough, R-Baltimore County, had a much different take. He made it clear he rejects any plan that would legalize undocumented workers.

"There is going to be a vigorous push for amnesty in the months ahead," McDonough said. "I believe that all of us who support the rule of law had better be prepared to fight."

McDonough, who has spoken out against illegal immigration

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in the past, said he has unsuccessfully pushed a number of bills on illegal immigration in the General Assembly over the past eight years.

He's not alone in his disdain for some of the bill's components. Help Save Maryland, an anti-illegal immigrant advocacy group, sent out a strongly worded message to members the morning after Gutierrez' announcement. The message condemned the proposal, and called on the government to withdraw funding from the immigrant advocacy group CASA de Maryland and require all state and local police authorities to participate in 287(g).

That citation, 287(g), refers to a government program allowing local police to enforce federal immigration laws. Frederick County is the only jurisdiction in Maryland currently participating.

In an interview, Help Save Maryland Director Brad Botwin said: "We're shocked but not surprised. (The proposal) is all about the illegals and nothing about the American people."

Audrey Singer, an expert on immigration at the Washington-based think tank The Brookings Institution, said Gutierrez' proposal reiterates concepts which have been features of the immigration debate for many years. These include the idea of a government commission to adjust visa quotas.

"In theory it's really good, but in practice it's tricky," Singer said. "It's very hard for us to change our law in a timely way. I'm not totally sold on the idea (of a commission), but I think enough people are behind this that it's going to be taken very seriously."

Singer said she favors something providing a pathway to legal status for undocumented workers based on criteria such as length of U.S. residency, and criminal background.

"I think it would be very difficult to isolate and deport millions of people, and I don't think it's a very popular choice."

Jena Baker-McNeill, a homeland security policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation, said legalization for undocumented workers "is not the solution in the short term."

Baker-McNeill said employment opportunities and other incentives for illegal immigrants should be removed in an effort to shrink the undocumented population before legalization is considered.

"On the legal side of things, the biggest thing we can do is improve our visa services," Baker-McNeill said. "They're poorly run and they don't really respond to the needs of employers."

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Daniel Griswold, a policy scholar at The Cato Institute, said tight restrictions on work visas for skilled professionals are among the "most glaring problems" of the current immigration system.

Griswold also argued for "a robust temporary worker program." Despite the recession, Griswold said, the number of Americans willing to accept low-skill jobs is in decline.

"We should double or triple the H1B visa cap so that firms can hire the workers they need to retain their production in the United States," Griswold said. H1B is a non-immigrant visa which allows American companies to employ foreign workers temporarily.

"Congressman Gutierrez' proposal is incomplete and probably wouldn't work as proposed," Griswold said, arguing that a government commission to adjust visa quotas would be in danger of becoming politicized.

Julie Park, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland's sociology department, said the proposal is likely to be "very contentious" given the economic situation, but reform is needed because the present system is not comprehensive and fails to meet employers' demands for workers.

Eliza Leighton, director of strategic initiatives for CASA de Maryland, said she was "incredibly pleased" with the congressman's proposal.

"We appreciated his being proactive and addressing the core issues of our current system," Leighton said. "We look forward to supporting him in the future."

State Delegate Victor Ramirez, D-Prince George's, has advocated comprehensive reform the past, and says he favors the ideas in Gutierrez' proposal.

"We want to make sure that those who obey the law are also given a fair chance to become legal here in the United States," Ramirez said. "And also to make sure that the visas are in accordance with what the demand is here."

Capital News Service contributed to this report.

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