

Catholic immigration advocates head to Hill

WASHINGTON - A workable comprehensive immigration reform bill on the table, more sympathetic leadership in Congress and a “this year or maybe never” incentive are prodding immigration advocates to action.

After a day and a half of briefings and strategizing with advocates who work on immigration every day, activists from more than 66 dioceses took their campaign for immigration reform to Capitol Hill April 19.

“It is terrifying, the prospect of a bad bill or no bill happening, considering the number of people who are involved in this,” said Frank Sharry, director of the National Immigration Forum. Sharry was keynote speaker for the April 17-19 Justice for Immigrants national gathering organized by the U.S. Catholic bishops’ migration awareness campaign of the same name.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has said he plans to bring immigration legislation to the floor for debate and a vote the last two weeks of May.

As of mid-April, there was no Senate legislation in the mix, but a House bill, H.R. 1645, had the backing - at least as a starting point - of many in a vast coalition of business, agriculture, union, civil rights, ethnic and religious organizations. It is called the Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act, or STRIVE Act.

At an April 18 session of the national gathering, Sharry was optimistic about getting an immigration reform bill signed into law this congressional session. He said the turning point in the debate about how to tackle immigration problems was the

passage last year of a House bill packed with strict enforcement measures and little to deal with problems such as the demand for workers that cannot be filled by existing visa allotments.

When that bill and a more comprehensive Senate version could not be reconciled and neither became law, Sharry said, the American people got fed up with both the current state of immigration problems and with congressional inaction.

The House bill contained several problematic provisions, including one that would have criminalized the act of providing help to illegal immigrants. Anger at the prospect of that bill becoming law galvanized hundreds of thousands of people to join rallies and marches around the country last spring. It also prompted voters, especially Latinos and other typical swing voters, to react in last year's congressional elections, Sharry said.

Efforts by some in the Republican Party to campaign on harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric backfired, he said.

"Latino voters in record numbers and swing voters in record numbers voted to fire the Republicans," Sharry said. "It's not so much that they voted for the Democrats, but they were firing the Republicans."

The public wants a solution to the problems of immigration, Sharry continued. "They are frustrated about immigration."

Doug Rivlin, also of the National Immigration Forum, said at another session April 18 that, despite loud rhetoric by those who back extreme border enforcement and who would push to deport or criminalize the estimated 12 million people who are in the country illegally, poll after poll shows the majority in the United States favors a more generous approach.

A USA Today/Gallup Poll conducted in mid-April found 78 percent of a random sampling of Americans favor giving illegal immigrants a pathway to legal status and

citizenship.

An assortment of polls over the last six months showed between 57 percent and 65 percent of people nationwide and 83 percent of Californians favor providing a path to legalization. California has been at the forefront of immigration problems and activism.

Kevin Appleby, director of migration and refugee policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the STRIVE Act has many of the components sought by the USCCB and other members of a broad coalition seeking a comprehensive immigration bill.

Among those components are: a path to legalization for people already here illegally; a new visa program for temporary workers; and a plan to make family-reunification immigration easier.

It also includes provisions for easing restrictions on agriculture-worker work permits, known as AgJOBS, the Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act, and the DREAM Act, the Development, Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act, to provide college-age children of illegal immigrants the chance to clear up their own legal status and attend college at in-state tuition rates.

“There are several other provisions that give us heartburn,” Appleby said, “but it’s a good start.”

The coalition would try to address areas that members see as problems through amendments if that bill progresses, he said. Among the provisions they find troublesome is a so-called “touchback” requirement that illegal immigrants return briefly to their home countries and re-enter the United States before they can start the legalization process.

More troublesome to Appleby is a proposal floated by the White House in early April that would allow current illegal immigrants to regularize their status only after paying significant fines over the life of a multiyear process.

“For a family of five, it would take 25 years and cost \$64,000 to get green cards,” Appleby said.

With Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate, the leadership may be more amenable to a comprehensive bill than their counterparts were last year, the speakers said. But Appleby cautioned that political calculations about immigration are still somewhat delicate.

“The House has a Democratic majority but they want to be the majority beyond two years,” Appleby said. “They fear that immigration is an issue that works for Republicans.”

Appleby said if a bill does not come out of this year’s session, advocates do not expect anyone in Congress to want to touch it during next year’s election cycle.