

# Signs of movement on immigration in Congress, federal agencies

WASHINGTON - After two years of essentially no change in the “on hold” status of immigration reform legislation, as well as eight years of increasingly restrictive federal policies toward immigration enforcement, signs of movement on both fronts are now coming fast and furiously.

President Barack Obama has repeatedly said he wants to begin consideration of a comprehensive immigration bill this fall, after health care legislation is finished.

As Congress neared votes on health care, progress was reported on drafting immigration legislation and supporters of comprehensive reform were rallying their forces and carefully laying the groundwork for the legislative battle to come.

Meanwhile, promised administrative reviews of some of the most harshly criticized aspects of federal immigration policies also were beginning to produce results that generally made advocates for immigrants happy.

The same week, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano outlined an overhaul of the system for immigrant detention. The changes address many of the long-standing complaints about the treatment of detainees, most of whom have applied for asylum, are awaiting resolution of applications to stay in the U.S. or have pending deportation proceedings.

Among the changes she said she anticipates are housing people with no criminal records and no history of violence in more residentiallike facilities, such as converted nursing homes or hotels, rather than in prisons and jails, where most are now kept. Others are likely to be released to their homes with ankle bracelets to monitor their whereabouts.

In late September, her agency announced it had moved the last of the families in detention out of the much-criticized T. Don Hutto Family Residential Facility in Taylor, Texas. Soon after the privately run medium-security prison was converted for use by families in 2006, Hutto became the subject of a lawsuit over conditions

inside.

Though a settlement agreement resulted in improved living conditions, it retained its prison character, with parents and children sharing small cells in a strict institutional atmosphere. Napolitano announced in early August that families would be moved out of Hutto and the entire system of immigrant detention evaluated.

Families detained at Hutto were either to be released with monitoring or moved to a more open type of residential setting, such as a family detention center in a former nursing home in Pennsylvania.

On the legislative front, hearings began in the Senate and Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill., scheduled for Oct. 13 an announcement of the principles that outline a comprehensive immigration reform bill he intends to introduce later this fall.

Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, told the immigration subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee in a hearing Oct. 8 that the U.S. bishops are anxious for comprehensive reform legislation to get moving, and also want changes in the refugee program and federal help to address the root causes of migration, such as underemployment in the "sending countries."

The cardinal also urged the Senate to tackle head-on the uncivil tone that has recently characterized debate about immigration.

"The U.S. bishops are very concerned with the tone on Capitol Hill toward immigrants, most recently in the health care reform debate," he said. "Such harsh rhetoric has been encouraged by talk radio and cable TV, for sure, but also has been used by public officials, including members of Congress."

He said he hoped the coming debate would focus on the contributions of both documented and undocumented immigrants "and not scapegoat newcomers for unrelated economic or social challenges we face as a nation."

The type of rhetoric the cardinal referenced was in evidence at an Oct. 7 event hosted by the Center for Immigration Studies, a research organization with ties to the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a leading supporter of immigration restrictions.

At a press conference in Washington, a Maryland Catholic priest took issue with the position on immigration reform taken by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and, particularly, the bishops of Maryland, in their 2007 statement “Where All Find a Home: A Catholic Response to Immigration.”

Father Dominique Peridans, ordained as a member of the Congregation of St. John but now serving as an associate pastor of St. Louis in Clarksville, argued that the church’s obligation is to follow the law on immigration, not to reach out to people who are here illegally. He particularly dismissed efforts to provide ministry in Spanish.

He and other speakers at the press conference – an evangelical minister and a former official of the American Jewish Committee and other Jewish and interfaith groups – complained about the number of Mexican immigrants in particular, and decried what they said were misinterpretations of Scripture by religious supporters of immigration reform.

But 24 hours later, the list of religious leaders backing comprehensive reform grew when the National Association of Evangelicals joined the long-standing partnership of faith groups working for immigration reform. The evangelical organization adopted a resolution calling for, among other things, a pathway to legalization for undocumented immigrants, changes in visa priorities for family members and workers, and fair labor and civil laws.