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Activists in Detroit rally for lawmakers to pass immigration reform bill

MARK HICKS THE DETROIT NEWS

Shouting “Pass that bill” and carrying signs reading “Keeping families together,” local activists Wednesday called for lawmakers to pass an immigration reform bill they say would lift burdensome restrictions, allow foreign-born workers to stay in their communities and boost the economy.

“We’re here today because we know that it is not right to hold 11 million undocumented workers hostage,” Pastor Charles Williams Sr. of the National Action Network said to cheers during a press conference on the steps of St. Gabriel Catholic Church in southwest Detroit.

The event was organized by Michigan United, a statewide coalition of churches, labor and community groups that advocates for immigration reform, fair housing and worker rights.

It came the same day the 844-page bipartisan bill was introduced.

The “Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013” would dramatically remake the U.S. immigration system, ushering in new visa programs for low- and high-skilled workers, requiring a tough new focus on border security, instituting a new requirement for all employers to check the legal status of their workers and installing a path to citizenship for 11 million immigrants in the country illegally.

Those who have been deported would have the opportunity to come back to the U.S. if their spouses or children are in the country.

Some Republicans criticized the bill as amnesty, while some groups on the left said it was unnecessarily punitive.

President Barack Obama said the bill is a compromise that doesn’t give anyone everything they want. But he urged the Senate to move it forward.

Supporters with Michigan United and other groups across Metro Detroit said the legislation would keep immigrant families together. “This bill is a way for families to be reunited,” Williams said.

The push for the reform is especially urgent for Arlen Villanueva-Ordoñez, a single mother of two originally from Honduras. The Belleville resident, who has been in the U.S. for more than a decade, faces deportation proceedings next month.

She has no criminal record, works full time and pays taxes every year, said her attorney, Brad Thomson. Her youngest child, who was born here, has life-threatening food allergies and a skin condition that renders him sensitive to UV radiation. Villanueva-Ordoñez also has health issues and fears she would have inadequate medical care in her homeland.

Deportation would destroy her family, she said. “I don’t want to be separated from them because that is my life.”

While many immigration reform advocates support the bill, some also are calling for changes — including rolling back the proposed increase in border patrol.

“Our border is already more secure than it’s ever been,” said Adonis Flores, a Wayne State University student and activist.

Meanwhile, Gov. Rick Snyder also has joined efforts to support immigration reform.

In a recently released video, Snyder announced his participation in the online March for Innovation on Washington, which is supported by leaders who want more skilled workers to help the national economy, his office said in a statement Wednesday.

“If you made a short list of what made America great, immigration would be on it,” Snyder said in the statement. “In Michigan, some of our biggest job-creators were founded by immigrants. ... Unfortunately, we’re turning that talent away. International students come to our country to study in our schools. Then they’re forced to leave and they’re taking jobs with them.”

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The Associated Press contributed