

Congress expected to address immigration issues_12405

January 22, 2005

Posted: 1/21/05

Congress expected to address immigration issues

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AUSTIN-Expect to see change in United States immigration policy during this congressional session, said Suzii Paynter, director of citizenship and public policy for the Baptist General Convention of Texas' Christian Life Commission.

"Our system is very broken, and the president has made it a priority" to fix the situation, Paynter said.

Three types of legislation are being considered in Congress-an agriculture jobs bill, new guestworker legislation and the Dream Act that would help non-citizen students fund a college education.

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The Ag Jobs Act is the “most likely to be acted upon,” Paynter said. It would provide short-term relief for undocumented agricultural workers, granting them legal status when there is a shortage of legal, documented workers.

The act also would provide long-term relief through a change in visa status.

New guestworker legislation would change the rules by which non-citizens are allowed to work legally in the United States.

Several bills have been introduced, including one by Sen. John Cornyn of Texas. The Cornyn bill basically is a “shell” that supports President Bush's immigration priorities, but which still is far from being in final form.

The Dream Act would adjust the legal status of previously undocumented students who graduate from high school in the United States. This would enable them to attend a state university without paying out-of-country tuition.

Immigration is on the political agenda now, because “frankly, our economy depends on the work of guestworkers in our country,” Paynter said. But current law does not provide an adequate framework for legal

participation by those workers.

Non-citizen workers must wait an “inordinately” long period for legal documents, and “immigration law changes almost daily because of the policies and procedures,” Paynter said.

There also are inequities. Federal and state governments are spending a large amount of time and money in dealing with illegal immigrants, but they are “not holding employers accountable for illegalities” in regard to hiring those workers.

Also, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, changed everything. “All of our remedies were created before we had a security need,” she said.

Today, there is a “common perception that we're not defending our borders,” Paynter said.

That leads to the “assumption that we need to put a wall up and completely defend our borders.”

As a result of the varied issues, “there is a convergence of concern, ... need ... and the human reality,” she said. “Other countries all over the world live in cooperation with their neighbors,” but in the United States “a set of beliefs has developed based on prejudice.”

That prejudice is against immigrants from Central and South America, Paynter said. “If you talk about immigration from any other group, you don't get the same level of resistance.”

That resistance is, in part, based on fear that millions of people from south of the border will overwhelm the United States with huge numbers of immigrants, she said.

Rather than letting such fears determine the legal remedies, immigration policy should be based on good economics and accurate information, Paynter said. “We have to base our solutions on reality and not on perception or myth.”

Additional Resources on Immigration:

- [Proposed federal Legislation to Legalize Undocumented Farm Workers: The Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits, and Security Act of 2003](#)
- [Undocumented Immigrants: Fact and Figures from the Urban Institute Immigration Studies Program, 2004](#)
- [The Border Security and immigration Reform Act of 2003, section by section summary](#)

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