

For Illegal Immigrants, More Questions Than Answers; Agencies Inundated With Calls About Bush Plan

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Body

The **calls** started pouring in to Dawn Lurie, a lawyer, almost as soon as President **Bush** wrapped up his speech this week **about** a new proposal to benefit **illegal immigrants**. Workers and employers alike were desperate to know: How could they sign up?

"There is no program. I explain to everyone we could wait a year or **more** to get legislation," said Lurie, part of the immigration law firm of Greenberg Traurig in McLean. Nonetheless, she said, one client insisted on applying for the benefit.

"I spent 15 minutes on that phone saying, no, there was nothing I could do right now," Lurie said.

Several lawyers and **immigrant**-assistance groups in the Washington area said they are being bombarded with **calls** and e-mails from workers eager to participate in **Bush**'s proposed program. But the immigration specialists say they have nearly as many **questions about** the **plan** as their clients do.

Federal lawmakers "have to write legislation based upon this rather amorphous **plan**," said Michael Maggio, an immigration lawyer in the District. "Nothing's really totally clear on this."

The proposal **Bush** announced Wednesday would allow many of the estimated 8 million **illegal immigrants** in the United States to apply for "temporary worker" visas, which would be good for three years and could be renewed. The president said the **plan** would help foreigners who had been living "in the shadows of American life" and also would benefit employers needing workers.

But **Bush** left many details of the **plan** to Congress. Analysts noted that the president's ideas could be changed significantly in the legislative process, and the proposal could even fail to pass.

No one knows exactly how many **illegal immigrants** live in the Washington area, but demographer Jeffrey S. Passel of the Urban Institute estimated tens of thousands, and possibly as many as 200,000. **Bush**'s announcement raced through **immigrant** communities and was featured by ethnic media, prompting the flood of **calls** from foreigners lacking work authorization.

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"People think there's a new law," Maggio said. "In most people's countries . . . that's the way the law is made. The president says it, and that's it."

One of the main questions being raised by immigrants is whether the program would allow them to stay indefinitely in the United States. Bush insisted that his program would encourage the workers to go home eventually. But he also said the immigrants could apply for a green card, the first step toward citizenship, if they had a relative or employer willing to sponsor them under the current system. He urged Congress to expand the pool of green cards available each year.

Several analysts, however, said a waiting list of a decade or more exists for some immigrants applying for green cards, which grant permanent residency. They said they doubted that the current system could accommodate a flood of new applicants.

May Shallal Kheder, an immigration lawyer in Falls Church, said she was getting "tons of calls" from local Latino and Arab workers asking about the proposal.

"People believe it's an amnesty when it's really not. It's a very temporary solution to a very permanent problem," she said.

She said she was still unsure about some of the basic elements of the plan, including whether employers would have to show that their workers were not displacing Americans. Bush administration officials have said that businesses would not have to prove this about their current employees.

Saul Solorzano, executive director of Carecen, an immigrant-assistance agency in Columbia Heights, said he received so many calls about the Bush proposal that he was planning a community assembly to provide information. But he acknowledged that he lacked many answers about how the program would work.

For example, he wondered how the program would affect many Central American immigrants in the area who have temporary work documents from other programs.

"There are so many people who are already in the pipeline" hoping to get permanent residence, he said. "What will be the benefit for them to join this program?"

Some immigrant advocates also were trying to determine how the plan might apply to workers with multiple employers, such as day laborers.

And what about current laws that ban many undocumented people from reentering the country for years?

Many employers had questions, too. Lurie said they wondered whether they would be penalized if they sought visas for undocumented workers who had been on their payrolls.

"If the employer comes out [and admits having such workers], will there be protection?" she asked. As described by government officials, the plan would not punish employers.

However, administration officials acknowledged at a background briefing for reporters this week that many aspects of the plan had to be ironed out.

"There are a lot of moving parts with respect to the detail of the worker program," one said.

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