

IMMIGRANT ADVOCATES OFF TO D.C.

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Highlight: The supporters of reform hope to push Congress to act.

Body

Pastor Moises Secundino-Trejo asked the congregation to pray for him as he left Sunday evening service early.

Outside, he led a circle of 40 other people in prayer before they boarded a bus to Washington, D.C.

"We ask you to soften the hearts of the Congress members," Secundino-Trejo, 49, prayed in Spanish. "Thank you and we declare victory for just immigration reform."

The bus riders who departed from Centro Cristiano El Shaddai joined 115 other Florida immigrants and advocates headed for Washington on Sunday.

Two buses also left Miami on Sunday, along with a train with 15 other people as part of a separate set of trips from various cities around the country called "Dreams Across America."

The lobbying trips are part of a renewed push by immigrant advocates nationwide to sway Congress into passing immigration reform, two weeks after a bill stalled in the Senate.

Senators indicated last week they could revive the debate as early as this week. But those pushing for immigration reform won't be the only ones applying pressure.

Faces on the debate

Several anti-illegal immigration groups who swamped lawmakers with phone calls against the bill two weeks ago plan to rally again.

"We need you ready to rumble with your calls, e-mails and faxes early Monday morning," William Gheen, president of Americans for Legal Immigration Reform, told his members Friday via e-mail.

The stalled bill would have paved the way for 12-million undocumented immigrants to become citizens.

But it also called for changing immigration policy from one that currently gives priority to immigrants with relatives already here to one that would favor educated immigrants who speak English.

The latter part is one reason not all immigrant advocates stood behind it.

"We made a decision (to support) a bill that would legalize 12-million people," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum.

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The bill has provisions for farmworkers and undocumented high school students, he said. "We want something done. Some activists are saying the status quo is better."

Hoping for any kind of change, Daniel Hernandez, 15, was among the riders in Clearwater. The trips were organized by the Florida **Immigrant** Coalition in an attempt to put faces on the debate.

They plan a march to the White House, as well as a graduation ceremony at a Washington-area church to showcase the achievements of **immigrant** students.

Daniel, a high school freshman from Pasco County, said his parents work in nurseries. He worries constantly that they will be caught by immigration officers and deported.

"The worst part is when you're in school, you worry about your parents," he said. "You don't know if they got caught."

A voice for workers

The train that left Miami on Sunday morning made a stop in Tampa a few hours later.

One person on board was Gabriela Pacheco, who is working on her bachelor's degree at Miami-Dade College.

Originally from Ecuador, Pacheco served as president of the Florida Junior and Community Colleges Association.

Because she is undocumented, she pays the more expensive out-of-state tuition. After graduation, she would not be able to get a job using her degree in special education.

"Pretty much I want to touch people's heart" in Washington, said Pacheco, 22. "Do you really want to say no to somebody that has so much potential like myself?"

In Clearwater, Martha Delamora said she was going on the trip to be the voice of workers who live in the shadows.

"If they can exploit our people who are working," said Delamora, 27, of Dade City, "they can at least give them a permit to work."

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