

Immigrants may get new chance at legal status;

President Bush asks Congress to extend a process that expired at midnight Monday.

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Body

Illegal **immigrants** who missed a **Monday** deadline to try to become **legal** residents **may get** another **chance**.

President Bush urged **Congress** on Tuesday to **extend** a provision of immigration law that **expired** at **midnight Monday**. The law let certain illegal **immigrants** --- those with family ties to U.S. citizens or employers who petition on their behalf --- to stay in the country while trying to become **legal** residents.

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Now that the law has **expired**, some **immigrants** face years apart from their relatives if they want to become **legal** residents. They have to travel to their native countries to apply for **legal** residency **status**, but most illegal **immigrants** who leave the United States cannot return for up to 10 years.

Ari Fleischer, **Bush's** spokesman, said the **president** wants to sign legislation to protect **immigrants**. "The **president** is very concerned about what would happen to families of **immigrants** . . . who would be forced to separate from their loved ones," Fleischer said.

Several proposals to **extend** the deadline are pending in **Congress**. The White House said **Bush** supports an extension that would affect about 200,000 people.

The Immigration and Naturalization Services has estimated that 640,000 people nationwide acted to become residents under the provision that **expired Monday**. It did not have an estimate Tuesday of the actual number of applicants, but there were signs that the law had generated enormous interest.

Thousands of **immigrants** waited in line and jammed INS offices across the country on **Monday**. An INS hotline that usually receives 750,000 calls a month has averaged 1 million calls a month since **Congress** passed the **Legal Immigrant** and Family Equity Act in December, said Elaine Komis, INS spokeswoman in Washington. She said the INS received a record number of applications in March from the type of people most affected by the law --- illegal **immigrants** who have married U.S. citizens.

The law triggered a boom in marriages across the country. In Georgia, court clerks issued 15 percent to 87 percent more marriage licenses in the first four months of this year than last year in **immigrant**-rich Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Hall, Gwinnett and Whitfield counties.

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In Atlanta, about 670 of 900 visitors to the INS office on **Monday** came to apply for a visa, the first step on the road to **legal** residency. Three people strolled in on Tuesday afternoon to **ask** about the law, unaware that the deadline had passed, said Sue Brown, INS spokeswoman in Atlanta.

"Evidently they had just heard about it," she said. "Maybe they just **got** into town. Who knows?"

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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