

## **Aid for illegal immigrants repaid in full?**

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### **Body**

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WASHINGTON -- In a move that could save California taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars annually, the House immigration subcommittee yesterday voted to fully reimburse states for the cost of providing emergency medical care to undocumented **immigrants**. Currently, the federal government reimburses half the cost.

Gov. Pete Wilson says the burden on California taxpayers has skyrocketed from \$21 million in 1988 to \$382 million this year. In approving the amendment by Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley, the committee also required that hospitals and other care providers report to the federal government the names and addresses of undocumented **immigrants** for whom they seek reimbursement. The amendment drew bipartisan support, but stopped short of requiring the Immigration and Naturalization Service to take timely steps to apprehend and deport undocumented **immigrant** patients. The provision, designed primarily as a basis for reimbursement, would require anybody providing free emergency medical treatment to check with the INS to verify the immigration status of any noncitizens.

The procedure would likely occur after treatment and would not be the basis for delay or denial of service, according to proponents. The unanimous voice vote on the amendment came as the subcommittee continued drafting a comprehensive overhaul of the nation's laws governing legal and illegal immigration.

A similar bill in the Senate doesn't have such a provision, although it is early in the legislative process. In another move that could bring financial relief to places like San Diego and Los Angeles with large numbers of undocumented **immigrants**, the subcommittee agreed to allow federal reimbursement for the cost of jailing criminal **immigrants**. Currently, states -- but not cities or counties -- may be reimbursed for the cost of incarcerating criminal undocumented **immigrants**.

California has a special stake in such a provision because most of the country's jailed criminal undocumented **immigrants** are in California. The bill quickly began gathering amendments yesterday that substantially added to its expense.

That raised questions from INS officials about whether the agency, which is experiencing growing pains and has limited training facilities, could responsibly absorb the costly increases. One amendment would triple the number of INS detention beds from about 3,000 currently to 9,000 by the year 1997. Without a corresponding increase in detention staff, the beds would be of little value. The subcommittee also approved a doubling of the number of INS officers who decide requests for political asylum in the United States.

Currently, there are 300 asylum officers on duty or in the process of being hired.

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A still-growing backlog of 450,000 claims has overwhelmed the system, but the Clinton administration says reforms implemented earlier this year and the new officers now being hired are beginning to tame the problem. The subcommittee also approved an amendment that would increase the number of INS investigators by 2,500 in an effort to equalize the number of agents in the interior of the country with the number along the border. With the number of Border Patrol agents slated to rise dramatically over the next five years, the increase of 2,500 investigators could be just the first major installment. While the INS seeks to dramatically bolster interior enforcement, it stopped well short of endorsing a 50-50 ratio between interior and border agents. The authors of the amendments and those who voted for them say they have no idea how much it will all cost.

At least one member, Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., openly challenged the budgetary realism of the actions. Also approved by the subcommittee was an amendment by Gallegly creating a "three strikes and you're out" policy, requiring the Border Patrol to detain for prosecution any undocumented ***immigrant*** guilty of violating the same immigration law more than twice. The provision is designed to discourage the large number of people who are repeatedly caught trying to sneak into the country, especially from Mexico.

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