

LABOR SECRETARY BRINGS ISSUES AND ANSWERS TO SAN JOSE CHAO PROMOTES BUSH'S NEW BUDGET, ALSO WANTS REVIEW OF HOW H-1BS ARE ISSUED

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Byline: MARY ANNE OSTROM, Mercury News

Body

Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao said Friday she wants to review how the government issues visas for skilled foreign workers under a controversial program backed by high-tech companies to fill jobs.

Appearing at a San Jose job training center, Chao acknowledged the need to find a better method for "checking the veracity of documents" for H-1B applicants. She appeared frustrated that her department only processes the requests for H-1B visas.

The H-1B program has fallen under much scrutiny because of alleged fraud and abuses. Chao said she thought the program could do a better job at assessing applicants through a joint task force between her department and the Department of Justice. She met with Attorney General John Ashcroft last week to discuss her proposal.

"Either we're going to be in charge of the documents or not," she said.

But Chao refused to discuss what steps the task force would take to address criticism that the process needed more scrutiny. She also acknowledged that a backlog of visa requests had grown after a new auto-fax system was installed two months ago and she was working to fix the bugs.

President Bush, during his campaign, supported the industry position that its global competitiveness would suffer without qualified workers brought to the United States through the program.

Chao made her stop in San Jose as part of a four-day stump to promote President Bush's new budget at a time of economic uncertainty. She spent the morning touring the San Jose Job Corps Center, where more than 400 low-income students receive training to enter the workforce.

After discussing H-1B visas, she said, "Let's try to develop a quality workforce that is able to take advantage of these great jobs and fill the demand of high-tech companies."

A child immigrant from Taiwan, Chao told the students, some of whom were immigrant themselves, that hope is what helped her get through the "daily indignities" she faced "not knowing much, not speaking English."

She also said the economy shows clear signs of weakening not only in high tech, but also in other parts of the country. She said a tax cut would be the best prescription.

"We may haggle over the exact size of the tax cut" Chao said. But, she added, "A meaningful tax cut will mean more money in workers' pockets to protect them from the softening economy that is coming."

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A small group of Democrats protested outside the job corps center.

"It just seems hypocritical that the Bush administration would send a cabinet member to tout a tax cut plan at the job corps center where the folks would likely not be the recipients of those benefits and in fact would be hurt by budget proposals to cut child care, health care and ergonomic standards," Santa Clara County Democratic Party Chairman Steve Preminger said.

Graphic

Photos (2);

PHOTO: RICK E. MARTIN -- MERCURY NEWS

Student Antonio Navarro helps Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao make a video conference call during her visit Friday to the San Jose Job Corps, where 400 low-income students receive training to enter the workforce.

PHOTO: RICK E. MARTIN -- MERCURY NEWS

Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao tries some of the fare from culinary students at the Job Corps Center.

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