

GOP EASES STANCE ON LEGAL-MIGRANT AID

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House Republican leaders, who Tuesday unveiled a revised welfare reform bill, have decided to allow legal immigrants who have not become citizens much greater access to federal assistance than they originally proposed.

Non-citizens would still be barred from receiving aid under the five largest federal programs: Medicaid, food stamps, disability aid, the revamped Aid to Families With Dependent Children and social-service programs known as "Title XX."

But, unlike legislation approved in recent weeks by House committees, the new bill would not bar legal immigrants from receiving aid under dozens of other federal programs, including education and training, lead screening and elderly assistance.

The revised bill, which was introduced earlier this week, is a consolidated form of legislation that three committees - Ways and Means, Economic and Educational Opportunities, and Agriculture -- have approved in recent weeks. The committees have voted to overhaul the nation's welfare system, replacing numerous federal programs with direct cash payments to the states.

Congressional aides said the changes were made in part to allow immigrants access to programs -- such as employment and training -- that will help them improve their status. But immigrant-advocacy groups say the change has done little to soften their opposition to the welfare reform.

"We were completely against the bill as it stood and are completely against it as it stands," said Robert Almanzan, director of communications for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. "It's still unjust."

The "big five" programs from which non-citizens are banned "are the most substantive programs. It seems un-American to say you can come, you can work, you can pay taxes, but if you ever become needy, you're denied help," he said.

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