

Legislation to aid immigrants is 'American-dream thing,' supporter says

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Body

Immigrants in Minnesota would get more help becoming citizens, attending college, and getting work under a legislative package announced Wednesday by House and Senate lawmakers.

The proposals would help the state attract the workers it needs to replace an aging bulge of workers who will be leaving their jobs over the next decade or so, they said.

"This is a good-justice thing," said Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul. "It's an American-dream thing."

Portions of the package have been debated in past legislative sessions, but have not passed either chamber. The package, which is being introduced in four separate bills, would:

- Provide immigrants access to tax credits for naturalization fees, which will increase from \$400 to \$600 this summer.
- Enable immigrant children who have attended Minnesota high schools for at least three years and graduated to get in-state tuition rates at state colleges.
- Establish the Minnesota Commission on New Americans, which would identify resources for immigrants and would work with businesses.
- Urge Congress to pass immigrations laws that would expand the number of work visas, reimburse hospitals for emergency care of undocumented immigrants, and pay for civics and English classes.

John Keller, executive director of the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, said it's unclear how many people would be affected by the various bills. About 7,300 people became new citizens in Minnesota in 2005, and 300 to 500 people could benefit from the in-state tuition proposal, he added.

Sen. Ann Rest, DFL-New Hope, said the number of students graduating from Minnesota high schools will peak next year, meaning fewer youths will be entering the workforce. For Minnesota to maintain its economic health, help must come from people who arrive here from other states or nations, Rest added.

"Immigrants are vitally important to our state and they've always been important," Mariani said.

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