

Obama, activists to push on immigration reform

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Body

President Barack Obama is enlisting activists and labor leaders in a push for comprehensive immigration legislation that will showcase Republican opposition and include a speech by the president.

The strategy was discussed during a meeting Monday by a range of prominent labor leaders and activist groups. Participants said Obama reiterated his support for immigration legislation but noted the political realities that have stalled it in Congress.

Latino leaders say they will work in coming months to pressure Republicans to give way and support an immigration bill and make opponents pay at the ballot box if they don't.

"We're going to make absolutely crystal clear who's at fault here," said Eliseo Medina, a leader of the Service Employees International Union.

Prospects for passage of comprehensive immigration legislation look bleak this election year, and even many Democrats are wary of wading into the hot-button issue. But Obama, who pledged as a candidate to make immigration reform a top priority during his first year in office, faces pressure from the Hispanic community to act or at least to try.

That's only intensified in the wake of Arizona's passage of a controversial law that requires police officers to question a person's immigration status if there's reason to suspect the person is in the country illegally. Obama has spoken out against the law and asked the Justice Department to examine its legality. Activists anticipate that the Justice Department will sue to overturn the law, but in Monday's meeting Obama said that decision would be left up to the department, and he didn't give a timeline, participants said.

Also Monday, high-ranking federal officials visited Arizona to brief the governor and others on Obama's recently announced plans to send National Guard troops to the border. The National Guard decision dismayed some activists, who said there were complaints in the meeting with Obama about the administration's emphasis on enforcement. But after talking with administration officials Monday, Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, a Republican, denounced the National Guard deployment as inadequate illustrating the divide facing Obama over immigration.

The White House said Obama would deliver a speech soon on "the importance of passing comprehensive immigration reform" but didn't give more details.

Given the difficulties of achieving a comprehensive bill, participants in the White House meeting said there was also discussion of attempting to pass smaller pieces of legislation such as a bill focused on agricultural workers, or one that would help illegal immigrant youths attend college.

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Obama is to meet Tuesday with Hispanic members of Congress.

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