Overhaul of overloaded asylum system sought

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Body

Immigration officials propose streamlining the nation's overwhelmed political ***asylum*** ***system***, cracking down on abusers and cutting work permits for applicants.

Congressional lawmakers will be briefed on the proposals this week, and a House subcommittee is expected to discuss them Wednesday.

The proposals are the second set of immigration initiatives from the Clinton administration. Earlier, legislation was introduced that would make it easier to exclude ***asylum*** seekers who arrive at U.S. airports without documents or with fake documents.

The latest proposals cover ***asylum*** applicants who are already in the country, legally or illegally. They would:

Double the number of ***asylum*** officers to about 300 and the number of immigration judges to about 150.

Grant work permits only to those approved for ***asylum***, and increase the time most applicants have to wait for permits from 90 days to 180 days.

Immediately reject obvious "boilerplate" applications - those that are nearly identical, come from the same ZIP code and are vague.

Crack down on untrained and unscrupulous "immigration consultants" who charge applicants high fees to prepare fraudulent applications.

Warn applicants in writing that they can be deported if they don't show up for a hearing. About 16% never show.

Deport those denied ***asylum***. Now, few people denied ***asylum*** are ever deported.

Fingerprint all applicants so those denied can't return under a different name.

"It's a tough bill and I have to say I'm gulping about it, but you can see these are serious (people) who want to do it right," says Warren Leiden, director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, which has criticized the ***asylum*** ***system***.

Political ***asylum*** is intended only for foreigners who can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group or political opinion.

But the ***asylum*** ***system*** is barely functional. More than 70% of the applications - 147,000 last year alone - are never decided. Others are decided only after years. Even the computer ***systems*** - there are six - are a mess: They can't all talk to each other.

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There's also a big loophole: Nearly every applicant gets a work permit within 90 days of filing - regardless of their ***asylum*** eligibility.

The INS has a huge case backlog - about 300,000 - that is growing by nearly a third each year. Officials say there's no way to reduce it with the current ***asylum*** corps.

Some argue that people in the backlog should be granted amnesty, but that may not sit well with Congress.

"We're not calling for amnesty," said Gregg Beyer, head of the ***asylum*** corps. "But if we get timely decisions and reduce the incentive to file abusive applications, that will go a long way to resolving the inadequacies in the ***system***."

Asylum seekers A backlog of applications has clogged the ***asylum*** process.

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'91	123,492	107,962

Notes

THE NATION; See info box at end of text

Graphic

GRAPHIC, b/w, Marty Baumann, USA TODAY, Source: U.S. Department of Justice (Line graph)

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