Chung: Green card cutback would hurt valley

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Body

Srinivas Yerra sits outside the Starbucks at Westgate Shopping Center, explaining to me his options, as the Senate undertakes debate on the massive immigration bill. Buried in the nearly 400-page document may be his fate.

The current system, for him, is not working well. The provisions in the proposed bill, however, could mean that after nine years here, his ***green card*** application is for naught.

"Every week or month I wonder if I should just pack my bags and go," said Yerra, 31, a baby-faced software engineer from the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where information technology and biotech is starting to rise alongside the state's agricultural base. "The last six months have been like that."

Yerra is one of about 500,000 legal immigrants, many H-1B visa holders, mired in backlogs at various points of the three-part ***green card*** application process. Amid the heat of the immigration debate, a group of frustrated, highly educated workers are advocating on their own behalf. Many stand to lose if reform is not smartly crafted. So does American competitiveness.

Furloughing talent

From a group of seven in December 2005, Immigration Voice - a non-profit organization for high-skilled foreign workers - has grown to more than 12,000 across the country. They have been navigating the legislative and political minefield hoping to clear the backlogs and win some relief.

In Silicon ***Valley***, they are primarily Indian and Chinese engineers, but they are also doctors, architects, financial professionals and former CEOs, said Pratik Dakwala, a local Immigration Voice leader and a San Jose business consultant.

Yerra is an applications software engineer, building the kind of software for data centers that nearly every company needs, from Barnes & Noble to eBay.

His work has taken him from Chicago to Boston to San Jose. But each time he moved, he had to start the ***green card*** application over again. The peculiarities of the process, involving one's employer, the U.S. Labor Department and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, mean H-1B visa holders must stay frozen in position for their application to stay alive.

They may not take a promotion or go to a new company without starting over. The wait can take up to eight years because of the backlog in ***green cards*** available to people who have met the requirements. Many are stuck in the Labor Department's optimistically named "Backlog Elimination Center." Spouses, like Yerra's doctor wife, cannot work until he has his ***green card***.

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Choosing America

The backlogs occur because **_green cards_** are capped at 140,000 annually for the employment-based visa category. The current proposal would cap it at 90,000, then simply disallow some backlogged applications like Yerra's. Immigration Voice hopes to stop this, and tweak the current law, to make the **_green card_** slots allocated by the country flexible and allow people to keep their applications in play, even with job changes.

"Unfortunately, America's immigration policies are driving away the world's best and brightest precisely when we need them most," Bill Gates told a Senate committee in March.

Yerra went job hunting in India in 2002, and concluded there were many things he could learn better here. Like others, he hopes to start a company in America - and leverage his bi-cultural, multi-lingual abilities to sell globally, perhaps to India.

Maybe Congress can take away Yerra's hopes for his **_green card_** - and all he may contribute to our economy. But it won't take away what he has learned. That's portable, all the way to India.

Is that really what we want?

See _www.immigrationvoice.org_. Contact L.A. **_Chung_** at _lchung@mercurynews.com_ or (408) 920-5280.

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