

HOUSE ADVANCES BILL TOUGH ON 'ILLEGALS'

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Body

DEBATING A CONTROVERSIAL immigration bill, the House voted Wednesday to allow states to deny schooling for children of illegal aliens and to block federal welfare benefits for American-born children of illegal aliens.

The votes reflected wide concern in states such as California over the burden to state and federal governments of providing benefits to "illegals."

The House also supported establishment of a program under which employers will be able to verify with a government data base whether job -seekers can legally work in the United States.

The pilot program had aroused widespread opposition among both conservatives and civil libertarians as the start of a "big brother" national identity system.

In heated debate, members argued that children should not be made to suffer for the fact that their parents entered the country illegally.

But in a rare address to the House, Speaker Newt Gingrich argued forcefully for an amendment by Elton Gallegly, R-Calif., to allow states to deny children of illegal aliens the right to attend public schools.

Gingrich said that requiring states to provide their schooling was a federal "unfunded mandate" - an order from Washington that the federal government does not pay for.

Citing California's Proposition 187 clamping down on benefits for illegal aliens, Gingrich said: "I think it's wrong for us to be the welfare capital of the world.

"Come to America for opportunity. Do not come to America to live off the law-abiding American taxpayer."

Rep. Xavier Becerra, D-Calif., deplored "going after the kids" and Rep. Anthony Beilenson, D-Calif., also said the proposal was unwise and inhumane.

Rep. John Bryant, D-Texas, accused Gingrich of seeking to take political advantage of the bipartisan bill by pushing through an amendment that could derail it.

The amendment was approved by a 257-163 vote.

The House defeated by 269-151 an amendment by Rep. Nydia Velasquez, D-N.Y., to remove a provision barring undocumented alien parents from applying for welfare, including food stamps and Medicaid, for their American citizen children for the first seven years.

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Velasquez said the **bill** "punishes innocent children," but Gallegly said the government should not reward persons in the country illegally.

The attempt by Rep. Steve Chabot, R-Ohio, to eliminate the employment verification plan was defeated 260-159. It would set up a pilot program in five of the seven states with the highest number of illegal immigrants.

The voluntary program, under which an employer would call a toll-free number to verify a job-seeker's right to work, united some liberals and conservatives in opposition.

Chabot charged that the goal was a national mandatory system under which the federal government "would assert the right to sign off on the employment of every citizen."

The **bill's** main architect, Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, denied any intent to establish a national identity system and said the plan was aimed at cutting back on aliens getting jobs by means of false documents.

Debate on the **bill** will continue today. The Senate has its own **bill** currently in committee.

Smith says immigration reform is needed to correct a system in which 80 percent of all immigrants are admitted without regard to skills or education, 20 percent of federal prisoners are illegal aliens, half the country's estimated 4 million illegal immigrants obtain jobs and benefits through fake documents and applications by immigrants for Supplemental Security Income have increased 580 percent since 1982.

According to Smith, his **bill** would cut illegal immigration in half in five years by doubling the number of Border Patrol agents and making it more difficult for illegal aliens to get jobs and government benefits.

At the same time, he said, the **bill** would continue "generous levels of legal immigration" at an average of 700,000 a year for the first five years, compared to about 775,000 in 1995. The **bill** would limit immigration by the "extended families" of naturalized U.S. citizens in order to increase admissions of spouses and minor children of legal permanent residents, Smith said.

Critics say legal immigration would drop by at least 30 percent from current levels after five years under Smith's **bill** and that many U.S. citizens would be unfairly prevented from bringing in their parents, adult children and siblings.

Human-rights advocates oppose the **bill's** provisions to cut refugee admissions in half from the current level of 100,000 a year and to tighten the rules for people who enter the United States illegally and then seek political asylum. The latter could be sent back to their countries immediately if they failed to pass an on-the-spot interview by an asylum officer, while asylum seekers who are already in the United States would have 30 days from their date of entry in most cases to file an application.

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