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All sides gear up for showdown on immigration

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WASHINGTON - Hispanic organizations, immigrant advocates, business groups and lawmakers are gearing up for what could be a major showdown on immigration.

As Congress prepares to tackle the topic, proponents of a plan to allow illegal immigrants to apply for temporary work visas are planning a lobbying blitz, starting with a rally in Washington, D.C., today, the first of several across the nation.

"The immigration debate is getting more and more ripe and ready for the picking," said Angela Kelley, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum, an immigrant advocacy group. "The breadth of support for change is enormous."

Some House Republicans and groups pushing for stronger immigration controls, however, vow to block any proposal that includes amnesty for illegal immigrants.

Tancredo pushes controls

Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., an outspoken critic of illegal immigration, spent much of August traveling to several states - including Iowa, Utah, California, Arizona and New Hampshire - to discuss the topic with citizens concerned about increasing numbers of illegal immigrants in their communities.

Tancredo leads an 88-member House caucus pushing for stronger immigration controls. His stance illustrates the divisions in the Republican party on the issue. President Bush and pro-business lawmakers back a temporary worker program, which would allow millions of immigrants, including those here illegally, to work in the United States for a number of years.

Walking a fine line

Some political observers say the White House is trying to come up with a plan to overhaul immigration while not angering those on the right who prefer a crackdown on illegal immigrants.

"They're trying to figure out whether they can effectively reform the system without making the people who don't like immigrants mad," said Cecilia Munoz, vice president for policy at the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic civil rights group and a sponsor of today's rally. "And the answer to that is no, you can't do it. You have to pick."

The rally, which will include immigrants and advocates from 30 states, will be followed by a day of lobbying on Capitol Hill.

Similar rallies and town hall meetings are planned in the fall in Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and Phoenix, organizers said.

The events are designed to support a proposal by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., that would create new visa categories for immigrant workers, who could remain in the United States for up to six years. McCain is scheduled to speak at today's rally.

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