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Omaha talk: Bush calls on migrants to assimilate

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OMAHA, Neb. — New arrivals to this country must adopt American values and learn English, President Bush said Wednesday, pushing anew to overhaul immigration rules.

To gain passage during this midterm election year, Bush must win over many in his own party who are opposed to provisions he demands besides stepped-up border enforcement. Those include a path to citizenship for many illegal immigrants and allowing additional work permits for foreigners.

The president has taken several tacks to bring around recalcitrant lawmakers, including repeated emphasis on his seriousness about tightening the border with more manpower and equipment and imposing stiffer penalties on businesses that hire illegal immigrants.

On Wednesday, aware that lawmakers are hearing from constituents alarmed by the added burden immigration places on police, schools and hospitals, Bush touted assimilation — immigrants' adoption of American culture.

He chose to do so in a state where the rising Hispanic population is creating frustration and influencing political races.

Bush visited a community center that offers English and other classes along with business startup help.

He also announced he was creating a new task force to encourage such efforts around the country and an Office of Citizenship within the Department of Homeland Security to promote the responsibilities and rights of U.S. citizens.

In Nebraska, immigrants are filling jobs at meatpacking plants and in the farm fields. Their increased presence was a factor in the May 9 Republican governor's primary in this solidly GOP state and is expected to figure in Democratic Sen. Ben Nelson's re-election race against Republican challenger Pete Ricketts.

Nelson opposes Bush's ideas and voted against a bill recently passed in the Senate that contains a guest-worker program and a shot at citizenship for illegal immigrants along with increased border security.

Nelson's alternative proposal would be generally limited to enhanced border enforcement, with provisions similar to a House bill passed last year that also includes hard-line measures such as making all illegal immigrants felons.

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