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Floridians join big push for immigration overhaul

Obama will lead charge to legalize millions

By William E. Gibson, Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON — From the White House to the vegetable fields of South Florida, advocates for immigration reform are about to launch a public-pressure campaign to prod Congress to enact sweeping legislation that provides a path to citizenship for millions of illegal residents.

Florida is among the large "destination" states at the forefront of a concerted push during the next two months for long-awaited reform.

Some evangelical churches next Sunday will kick off 40 days of prayer and reading of scriptural passages to demonstrate their concern "for the immigrants among us." The Florida Chamber of Commerce plans a letter-writing campaign. Rallies, marches and news conferences will clamor for comprehensive legislation.

And a group of farmworkers from South and Central Florida is heading to Washington in minivans to lobby for the cause.

All these and other Florida advocates plan to contact members of Congress to buttress President Barack Obama's pitch for comprehensive reform, expected to be a major part of his State of the Union address next month. The president has paved the way by issuing new rules that make it easier for children of illegal immigrants as well as spouses, parents and children of U.S. citizens to remain here legally.

"We need a bigger solution than these little pieces of immigration reform. We need a full, complete reform to solve all the problems at once," said Tirso Moreno, coordinator of the Farmworker Association of Florida, a group based in Apopka with 10,000 members in South and Central Florida.

The Florida caravan — about a dozen and expected to grow — is just a sample of the grass-roots lobbying taking shape as long-standing proponents sense a willingness in Congress to transform the immigration system.

"The conversation has stepped up a notch because of the election results and how much impact Hispanic voters had on the election," said Joel Hunter of Orlando, senior pastor of Northland, A Church Distributed, one of many religious leaders converging in Washington this week to talk about immigration.

The grass-roots lobbying is designed to reinforce a White House campaign to sell immigration reform to a divided Congress, where many members remain staunchly opposed to proposals they consider an amnesty for 11 million illegal immigrants, including roughly 825,000 in Florida.

Obama's success in the November election — including 71 percent support from Hispanic voters and nearly half of Cuban-Americans — prompted House Speaker John Boehner to signal willingness to take up an immigration bill.

"It's got to be done the first year of this Congress," U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, said last week. "I'm not naive. It's a very heavy lift, but it has to get done."

He and fellow Miami Republican Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen will host an invitation-only forum in Doral on Monday to gather thoughts from immigration stakeholders.

Other forums, rallies or news conferences are expected during the next few weeks, though perhaps not the mass demonstrations that triggered a backlash in recent debates.

"I love activism," Diaz-Balart remarked, "but I'm not sure rallies would be helpful. To get this done, we need to lower the passion, lower the decibel level."

He is huddling with House members of both parties to craft legislation, and Democrats and Republicans in the Senate also are trying to thrash out a bipartisan bill.

The legislation most likely would provide a way for long-established illegal residents to get work permits and start a long process toward legal permanent residence and eventually citizenship. It also would include a foreign-guest-worker program to meet seasonal labor needs and a requirement that employers tap a federal database to check workers' immigration status.

White House officials would not reveal their plans last week. Advocates familiar with their thinking expect the president to promote legislation in speeches and rallies while spreading the word through social media and a network of labor unions and Hispanic groups developed during the election campaign.

"We can feel it. They are gearing up the Cabinet, getting ready for this to be the next big thing," said Frank Sharry, director of America's Voice, an advocate for legalization. "The real kickoff will be the State of the Union address."

During Obama's first term, the administration tried to reassure doubters in Congress by rigorously enforcing existing laws, deporting record numbers and beefing up border enforcement. A study released last week by the Migration Policy Institute found that the administration spent more on immigration enforcement last fiscal year — \$18 billion — than on all other federal law enforcement.

But the tough stance failed to sway Republicans. Pressured by Hispanic groups, Obama used his executive powers to give work permits to the children of illegal immigrants and to ease the process for foreign spouses, parents and children of U.S. citizens to get visas.

"It's a baby step in the right direction," said Jeffrey Brauerman, an immigration attorney in Plantation and a former immigration judge.

He sees a chance to transform a system still largely built on the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952.

"I think it's time for a real overhaul," Brauerman said. "I think it's the only time. We're four years from another presidential year, almost two years from another congressional election. If they can't do it now, they aren't going to do it."

wgibson@tribune.com or 202-824-8256

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