

Immigrant Advocates Take Their Case to Capitol Hill

Activists Lobby Members of Congress, Aides on Legislation

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Trading placards for handshakes and T-shirts for ties, immigrant rights activists who have recently staged huge rallies across the country took their campaign to the halls of Congress yesterday as hundreds of people met with elected officials or their aides to lobby for immigration reform.

About 400 church, union and civic leaders from 20 states swarmed the U.S. Capitol to press for legalization of all immigrants and express opposition to current proposals, including President Bush's plan to use the National Guard to shield the nation's southern border, according to organizers.

"For us, no law is better than a bad law," Jaime Contreras, chairman of the National Capital Immigration Coalition, said in Spanish to Alejandro Perez, an aide to Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.), during a meeting that was held in a hallway because the lobbying contingent -- more than 30 activists from Maryland and the District -- could not fit in the congressman's office.

Washington area advocates met in person with five members of Congress from Maryland -- all Democrats considered sympathetic to the immigrant rights campaign, including Sens. Barbara A. Mikulski and Paul S. Sarbanes. But in many cases, activists made their cases to congressional staffers. Most meetings were held behind closed doors, and many aides referred questions to their offices' press secretaries.

A group of about 10 Virginia- and D.C.-based activists, for example, met with an aide to Sen. George Allen (R-Va.). When they emerged, the group's members said they were instructed not to share any of the aide's comments or even to characterize them. They said only that each side listened to the other.

"It was off the record," said Hugo Carballo, a leader of a Northern Virginia construction workers union.

At the time of the meeting, press secretary David D. Snepp said, Allen was on the floor of the Senate, which yesterday voted to require construction of 370 miles of fencing on the U.S.-Mexico border and passed a provision that blocks convicted felons and certain other illegal immigrant offenders from becoming legal residents under a pending bill. Senators rejected a proposal that would have stripped the bill of provisions that allow illegal immigrants who have been in the country for more than two years to get on a path to U.S. citizenship.

"Senator Allen's staff was glad to receive the input and feedback they got from this group," Snepp said, adding that Allen's position on immigration reform had not changed: "He has said first and foremost that he wants to secure our borders, and all other issues are second."

Later, a Baltimore group met with Robert L. Harbaugh, a legislative assistant to Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest (R-Md.), who voted in December for an enforcement-only House

bill that immigration activists have sought for months to kill. Harbaugh took notes as the visitors spoke of families divided by the immigration system and the need for protection of immigrant workers.

Harbaugh responded that Gilchrest wants a realistic and comprehensive bill but is waiting for Senate action before taking a stance.

"The big question now is, what do we do with the people already here?" asked Elizabeth Alex, an organizer for CASA of Maryland, referring to the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. Harbaugh was noncommittal. But he had his own question: What did they think of Bush's plan for the National Guard? Alex referred to it as a "band-aid."

The delegations included 35 California clergy members, a busload of Illinois activists and scores more who traveled from Florida, New York and beyond.

"There are so many people who are lobbying for the first time today, and it has been an empowering experience for them to tell their stories and be part of this legislative process," said Kate Shaughnessy, spokeswoman for the New American Opportunity Campaign, an organizer of the lobbying day.

Standing out among the mostly Latino activists were members of the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform, who came on behalf of the more than 50,000 illegal Irish immigrants, most of whom have overstayed the visas that allowed them into the country, said Ciaran Staunton, the group's vice chairman.

"We're optimistic -- we're Irish!" Staunton said.

Yesterday afternoon, activists gathered for a rally on the Mall, where they listened to speeches by Maryland Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Montgomery) and U.S. Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez (D-Ill.). Several activists -- including a group from California that said it delivered to its senators thousands of letters demanding legal status for illegal immigrants -- pronounced the day successful.

Jose Rodriguez of Wilmington, Del., was not so sure about the lobbying day's impact.

"They say whatever they want," Rodriguez, 27, said of the elected officials and their staff members. "And I don't know what they're going to do."