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Frustrations over inertia on immigration law bring pressure for fixes

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As frustration grows over the lack of progress on immigration reform and protests about the high number of deportations become more widespread and dramatic, President Barack Obama on March 13 and 14 told activists he would consider ways to ease the effects of strict enforcement.

The announcement came as immigrants facing deportation have been waging hunger strikes in detention centers and religious leaders, immigrants and other activists have been participating in advocacy campaigns involving fasting, prayer and public actions. Meanwhile, the House passed two bills aimed at reining in the kind of administrative steps Obama might take.

In a meeting at the White House with congressional Hispanic leaders March 13, Obama said he would ask Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson to "do an inventory" of current practices related to deportation and "see how it can conduct enforcement more humanely within the confines of the law," said a readout on the session from the White House.

A day later, Obama, Johnson and other key administration officials met with representatives of more than a dozen organizations working for comprehensive immigration reform. The president reiterated his concern for the pain faced by families affected by deportation, but said a permanent solution to the problems of the immigration system must come through "meaningful comprehensive legislation," according to the White House.

Some participants in the meeting told reporters or issued statements saying that while they encouraged administrative actions to ease the effects of deportation, they also agree it's up to Congress to fix the whole system.

The Associated Press said Frank Sharry, director of America's Voice, said he encouraged the president to "go bold, go big, go now."

"The president has the ability to step into the vacuum created by the House Republican inaction to protect millions of people who are low priority, use his executive authority in an expansive way," he said.

Two years ago, Obama created the program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, which provides a way for young adults who came to the United States as minors to avoid deportation and get permission to work, as long as they attend school and meet other requirements. While more than half a million people have been approved for DACA, the administration also has been deporting people at record rates -- about 2 million have been deported since Obama took office.

Without specifying what policies might be affected, Obama had previously said that if he continues to be unable to get legislation passed in Congress, he would seek remedies through administrative actions.

The day after the meeting with the Hispanic Caucus leaders, a spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner, R-

Ohio, warned that anything Obama does to bypass Congress when it comes to deportations could irreparably damage the chances of passing comprehensive immigration reform.

The AP quoted Boehner spokesman Brendan Buck as saying, "There's no doubt we have an immigration system that is failing families and our economy, but until it is reformed through the democratic process, the president is obligated to enforce the laws we have. Failing to do so would damage -- perhaps beyond repair -- our ability to build the trust necessary to enact real immigration reform."

Earlier in the week, a group of Catholic bishops and evangelical leaders made the rounds of congressional offices, including Boehner's, to push for immigration reform. In a press release about the sessions, the leaders said the broad consensus among Catholics and evangelicals in support of immigration reform illustrates the importance of the issue.

Seattle Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee, said that as pastors, the group that visited Capitol Hill knows "there is an urgency to this issue, as families are being separated daily. As a moral matter, Congress and the nation can no longer stand by as immigrant communities and families are being ripped apart."

In the House the same week, two bills passed seeking to limit the president's power to enact programs such as DACA. Neither the Faithful Execution of the Law Act (H.R. 3973) or the ENFORCE the Law Act (H.R. 4138) stands a chance of coming to a vote in the Senate, but both passed the House by more than 50-vote margins.

"ENFORCE" stands for the "Executive Needs to Faithfully Observe and Respect Congressional Enactments" of the law.

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