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Judiciary Committee approval moves immigration bill on to full Senate

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | May. 22, 2013
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Advocates for comprehensive immigration reform expressed optimism and hope for a law to pass this summer after the Senate Judiciary Committee May 21 finished wading through 300 proposed amendments - accepting about a third of them - and passed the massive bill on to the full Senate.

Comments lauding the committee's effort came from faith groups, young adults who would benefit from the DREAM Act, which is included in the bill, and even from a Catholic bishop in Ireland.

In the final hours of the fifth day of the bill's markup, agreements were reached on two areas that threatened to derail the bipartisan alliance that wrote the bill and will be crucial to its passage by the Senate.

One agreement wrangled by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, would expand the number of visas the bill would provide for highly skilled workers. The other was a concession by Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., chairman of the committee, to withhold an amendment he supports that would include same-sex married couples under the provisions for family reunification visas.

The proposed provision would have been a deal-breaker for at least one of the so-called "gang of eight," the bipartisan group of senators who drafted the bill, Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla. Some of the faith groups that have been active in pushing for comprehensive immigration reform but oppose same-sex marriage, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, also worked to keep the amendment off the bill.

Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., another of the bill's authors, said he thought leaving out the provision amounts to "rank discrimination," but added, "as much as it pains me, I cannot support this amendment if it will bring down the bill."

Leahy read a statement saying that after more than 50 years of marriage he "cannot fathom how I would feel if my government refused to recognize our union or if the law discriminated against me based on who I fell in love with."

He said his amendment wouldn't have changed a single state law -- more than 30 prohibit same-sex marriage -- and likened those current laws to the era of miscegenation laws, which barred marriage between people of different races.

The federal Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as between a man and a woman, means same-sex spouses currently are not entitled to the immigration benefits that heterosexual spouses may seek. That law is under constitutional review by the Supreme Court, with a ruling expected before the end of this term in late June.

Faced with the prospect that the amendment might mean the end of the whole bill, Leahy said he would withhold it, after having concluded, "it is not the bill I would have drafted and falls short of what I had hoped

we could accomplish, but it may well be the best we can do in the present partisan circumstances."

The bill will move to the Senate floor for debate probably in mid-June. A House comprehensive immigration reform bill is reportedly in the works.

Among other provisions, S. 744 incorporates the popular DREAM Act, without an upper age limit; would offer a 13-year path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who arrived before 2012; would expand the pool of visas for skilled and unskilled workers; dramatically changes the process for adult children or siblings of legal residents to immigrate; and would create a new set of "triggers" for determining that the border is "secure" before parts of the law may be implemented.

Those lauding the bill's progress included Catholic Bishop John Kirby, chair of the Irish Bishops' Council for Emigrants, who asked for prayerful support for the success of a bill that he said would "give a path to citizenship for the estimated 50,000 undocumented Irish living in the United States."

Bishop Kirby, who heads the Diocese of Clonfert, said the legislation would enable Irish emigrants "to realize their dreams and ambitions, to come out of the shadows and to contribute actively as members of their local community. Crucially, it would also be a family-friendly law allowing our emigrants to return home to visit parents and loved ones, especially for important family occasions."

Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, said the Judiciary Committee's step means "immigration reform took a giant step forward."

He called it a carefully balanced piece of legislation "that can both pass this Congress and work when implemented."

Cristina Jimenez, managing director of United We Dream, said in a statement that the committee's vote, 13-5, moves the nation one step closer to a historic victory.

"Immigration reform that creates a real roadmap to citizenship for millions of Americans, ends senseless deportations, and reunites families, is within our sights," she said.

Evangelicals participating in Pray for Reform: 92 Days of Prayer and Action to Pass Immigration Reform, said they focused their prayers on a bill "with no amendments that would jeopardize chances for final passage, said a statement. "As reported, the bill meets that description."

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