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THE LATEST IDEAS ON CHANGING U.S. IMMIGRATION LAW

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The headline news when House Republican leaders release their principles for immigration legislation, likely this week, will probably be the GOP's embrace of legalization for many of the 11.5 million immigrants living illegally in the U.S. today. But to make the promise real, legislators are working to settle a mountain of details. Some of the ideas are meant to attract Democratic support, and some are meant to draw Republican support. Support from both parties will be needed if the legislation ever makes it to the House floor.

Since last summer, leading lawmakers have sketched out the basic idea. Give illegal immigrants who qualify a legal status, but no promise of citizenship—an effort to try to satisfy both sides. Instead, offer them the chance to access existing opportunities to gain legal permanent residence, also known as a green card. Once someone has a green card, he or she can apply for citizenship.

Behind that general idea, many questions must be settled. No final decisions have been made about any of this, but a look at the ideas under consideration offers a window to GOP leaders' thinking about how they can move immigration through the House.

Ideas being discussed meant to attract GOP support include:

Don't allow anyone to gain legal status until certain enforcement provisions, such as some involving border security, are met.

Require illegal immigrants to go through some sort of adjudication process, by which they admit guilt for their immigration crimes, pay fines and any back taxes owed. Republicans call this getting "right with the law." After this, they could get a probationary legal status.

During a probationary period, if someone breaks the rules, he or she would be subject to deportation.

Require implementation of the E-Verify system for employers to check the legal status of potential employees. If the system is not in place by a certain date, the people who gained legal status would revert to illegal status.

Allow state and local governments to write their own immigration enforcement laws. The Supreme Court struck down Arizona's attempt to do this, saying federal law reserves this duty for Congress.

Ideas being discussed that could help attract Democratic support include:

Eliminate the so-called three- and 10-year bars. Under current law, most people in the country illegally for more than six months must leave the country for three years before becoming eligible for a green card even if they, say, marry an American citizen or otherwise qualify. Those in the country for longer than a year must leave for 10 years before they are eligible to apply. If those bars stayed in place, it would be impossible for any illegal immigrants to take advantage of the new opportunities, experts say.

Clear backlogs that have jammed the existing green card system, for both legal and formerly illegal immigrants seeking green cards. Immigrants can qualify for green cards through family or employment ties, but some of those paths are badly jammed. For instance, Americans have the right to sponsor their siblings for green cards, but there are numeral quotas and limits for each country. So the backlog is many years long for certain groups, such as people trying to sponsor siblings from the Philippines.