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REPUBLICANS WON'T INCLUDE DACA IN YEAR-END SPENDING BILL

After meeting with President Trump, GOP senators indicate legislation can wait on protections for young immigrants brought to U.S. illegally as children

By Laura Meckler and Byron Tau
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WASHINGTON – With the clock ticking and so-called Dreamers in limbo, Senate Republicans signaled Thursday they are in no hurry ahead of a March deadline to pass legislation giving legal protections to young immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally as children.

Democrats and their allies have been laying the groundwork to try to include these protections in a year-end spending bill, a moment when their votes will be needed and they will have power to make demands. These must-pass bills are often used as a vehicle to push through contentious legislation while minimizing political fallout.

But on Thursday, a group of Senate Republicans met on the issue with President Donald Trump and some of them emerged to say that they don't want to include the issue in the spending bill, which lawmakers must pass to keep the government running. Rather, they suggested punting the matter into next year, giving lawmakers a tight time frame ahead of the expiration of the Obama-era program in March.

This group of young immigrants is now protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program, which Mr. Trump acted in September to end, announcing a six-month wind-down period.

"There was...consensus that anyone on the other side of the aisle who thinks that they're just going to codify DACA in the year-end appropriations bill won't be very well received," said Sen. Thom Tillis (R., N.C.), one of seven GOP senators in the meeting.

During the meeting between lawmakers and Mr. Trump to discuss the Dreamer issue, people familiar with the discussion say, the president pressed them on a different immigration issue: his opposition to the Diversity Visa Lottery, which awards visas to 50,000 people from countries that are underrepresented in immigration to the U.S.

After the meeting, Mr. Trump called on Congress to "immediately terminate" the program. "It's a disaster for our country," he said.

In 2010, one of the winners was a young man from Uzbekistan who authorities say went onto commit a deadly terror attack in New York this week.

A White House official said Thursday that ending the lottery program has become a "priority" for the president and one legislative option would be to pair ending it with extending Dreamer legislation. Democrats have been willing to jettison the program before, as part of larger comprehensive bills, and passions around the matter are much cooler than other Trump immigration priorities, such as his desire for a southern border wall.

The program enjoys strongest support from the Congressional Black Caucus, which sees the lottery as one of the few paths to the U.S. for many people from African and Caribbean nations.

Democratic leaders have been careful not to threaten a government shutdown over the Dreamers matter, but they also have signaled that they will insist on legislation protecting Dreamers this year, rather than letting the matter spill into 2018. Democratic votes will be needed to pass the spending bills necessary to keep the government open, which gives them leverage even though they are in the minority in both houses of Congress.

"We're going to do everything we can to pass the bill," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) said Thursday when asked about the Dream Act. He didn't offer any details about his strategy.

White House officials declined to comment on Mr. Trump's views about including Dreamer legislation in the year-end spending bill.

Immigrant advocates reacted with alarm at the suggestion that Republicans might try to pass the spending bill that doesn't protect Dreamers, seeing it as their only realistic chance for action. They fear that a stand-alone bill helping these young immigrants would include numerous enforcement provisions that advocates oppose.

Frank Sharry, executive director of the advocacy group America's Voice, called on Democrats in both houses to make clear that they won't accept a budget deal without Dream Act provisions. "Delay means defeat and we are not going to stand for it," he said.

- Louise Radnofsky contributed to this article.