

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

TRUMP SIDESTEPS FAMILY SEPARATIONS IN TALKS WITH GOP

President calls for broad immigration bill amid bipartisan uproar over administration's policy at the border

By Siobhan Hughes and Louise Radnofsky
June 19, 2018

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump on Tuesday called on Congress to give him the power to detain migrant families as a unit, saying he considered that the “only solution to the border crisis” and separation issue that has rocked immigration negotiations and his administration.

The administration’s new policy of detaining adults attempting to cross into the U.S. at the southern border, which has resulted in separating children from parents or other adults, has sparked explosive debate in recent days. As Democrats and some Republicans have called for an end to the policy, Mr. Trump and his administration officials have dug in and sought to blame Congress for not having passed a broader immigration overhaul that might have ameliorated the problem.

Current law prevents migrant children from being held with adults, and the Trump administration policy, by arresting more adults and charging them with border-crossing offenses, has meant more children are separated from their parent or other adult.

In remarks at a National Federation of Independent Business meeting he said he considered the only two options to be “totally open borders or criminal prosecution for lawbreaking.” He said he adopted the separation policy because past administrations’ approach of not detaining adults traveling with children had ensured “child smugglers exploit the loopholes.”

He said he wanted to see Congress “give us a third option...the legal authority to detain and properly remove families together as a unit.”

Texas GOP Sen. Ted Cruz, who is up for re-election this year, said he plans to introduce legislation this week that would create new temporary shelters to keep families together while asylum cases are pending, and other GOP senators, including fellow Texan John Cornyn, were proposing similar measures. Meanwhile, the entire 49-member Senate Democratic caucus had signed on to legislation that prohibits separation of parents and children as a deterrent to crossing the border, led by California Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

The House is also poised to consider two GOP measures this week that would address issues including border security, funding for the wall and a way to protect Dreamers. House Republicans, buffeted by a weekend of escalating criticism over the separation issue, plan to include a provision to measures to address the family separations.

Mr. Trump said at the NFIB meeting that he expected to be briefed on the immigration proposals when he met with House members later Tuesday, and that he planned to “make changes” to the package they put before him. “We have one chance to get it right. We might as well get it right or let’s just keep going,” he said.

Mr. Trump on Tuesday again tried to lay the blame for the immigration policy on Democrats, which could drive away votes needed to push a bill through Congress. In a tweet, he alleged Democrats “don’t care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country,” saying they view such immigrants “as potential voters!”

Democrats argue that because Mr. Trump started the policy, he should be the one to stop it, and not tie it to broader immigration legislation.

“Infest? We’re not talking about insects, these are children!” tweeted Sen. Bob Casey (D., Pa.). “You are talking about kids who are scared, alone and being held in cages. You have the power to stop it, do it.”

A decades-old court settlement bars the U.S. government from jailing migrant children. Until recently, the result was that families who crossed the border seeking asylum were often released into the U.S. while their cases are pursued.

The Department of Homeland Security said Tuesday that it had registered 2,342 children as unaccompanied minors between May 5 and June 9, after detaining 2,206 adults.

DHS had previously said it had separated 1,995 immigrant children from 1,940 adults as of the end of May.

Other congressional Republicans sought to get ahead of potential political fallout by pushing the Trump administration to put on hold the policies.

Sen. Orrin Hatch (R., Utah) was circulating a letter among senators that asks the Justice Department to pause its “zero tolerance policy” resulting in separating families at the border until Congress passes legislation. The senior lawmaker planned to send the letter Tuesday, according to a spokesman.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.) added his name to the list of concerned Republicans, saying that Mr. Trump should reverse the policy.

“The White House could change it in five minutes and they should,” he told reporters. “It’s a mistake. It’s a change in policy by this administration.”

Rep. Mark Meadows (R., N.C.), chairman of the influential conservative bloc known as the House Freedom Caucus, said he planned to introduce a standalone bill to prevent the separation of migrant children from their parents at the border. He said the legislation wouldn’t address other immigration measures, like border security and the legal status of young immigrants who came to the country illegally as minors.

“Hopefully it provides a path forward if the other two bills that we have don’t go anywhere,” Mr. Meadows said in an interview with Fox News. He spoke ahead of an early Tuesday meeting at the White House.

House Republican leaders haven’t said whether they would allow a vote on such a standalone bill if the two separate immigration bills expected to get votes on Thursday fail to pass. Those bills include provisions allowing families to stay together in immigration-detention facilities.

Neither that immigration bill, developed with support of both GOP centrists and conservatives, nor a more conservative measure sponsored by Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.), is seen as likely to pass. That is because the Republican party is fractured and because Democrats are expected to unify against both measures. House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D., Md.) said Tuesday that neither bill provides a reasonable solution for children who are separated from their parents at the border, or for Dreamers, the young immigrants brought to the country as children and living in the U.S. without legal authorization.

On Tuesday, the White House also came under new pressure from outside groups, with the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce issuing statements against the separation policy.

The Faith and Freedom Coalition, headed by Trump administration ally Ralph Reed, called for "immediate legislative action" to end the family separation and called for House lawmakers to pass either of the two immigration bills on the table.