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MUCH-ANTICIPATED IMMIGRATION BILL IS INTRODUCED

By Corey Boles
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A bipartisan group of senators introduced Wednesday a sweeping immigration bill that would provide a path to citizenship for the 11 million illegal immigrants currently residing in the U.S. but only after a series of "triggers" are met to strengthen border security.

The Senate Judiciary Committee is now scheduled to convene at least two hearings on the legislation beginning Friday, which could see further changes made to the package of changes before lawmakers on the panel vote on the bill. The full Senate would then have to debate and possibly amend the bill further, a process that isn't expected to begin until May at the earliest.

An agreement on the bill was reached between the eight senators – four Republicans and four Democrats – after months of behind the scenes negotiations. If they are successful in moving forward with the bill, it will be a relatively rare example in recent times of major legislation being initiated by rank-and-file lawmakers rather than originating at a major committee or in the leadership offices.

The legislation was released after 2 a.m. on Wednesday morning by the group of lawmakers.

"This bill marks the beginning of an important debate, and I believe it will fix our broken system by securing our borders, improving interior enforcement, modernizing our legal immigration to help create jobs and protect American workers, and dealing with our undocumented population in a tough but humane way that is fair to those trying to come here the right way and linked to achieving several security triggers," said Sen. Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, the lead GOP negotiator of the group.

In the House, a group of bipartisan lawmakers are also working on their version of a bill, although it remains unclear what level of success they will have. House leaders have said they ultimately intend to pass their own version of immigration legislation that would then have to be married up with a Senate version.

In the wake of the November elections, top lawmakers of both parties identified an overhaul of the country's immigration laws as a key area of potential bipartisan cooperation.

Groups in favor of modernizing immigration laws praised the legislation as a major breakthrough and urged the Senate to pass the bill soon.

"This legislation, while not perfect, is a monumental step forward in ensuring that this nation has a fair, humane and effective 21st-century immigration policy that serves our nation's best interests and works for all Americans, including families, workers and businesses," said Janet Murguía, president and chief executive of the National Council of La Raza, a leading pro-immigration reform group.

Numbers USA, a prominent group dedicated to lowering levels of immigrants in the U.S. that is opposed to any legislation that grants a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants, posted a note on its web site urging people to call their senators to voice their opposition to the bill.