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ACROSS THE COUNTRY, SUPPORTERS RALLY FOR IMMIGRATION OVERHAUL

By Julia Preston
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Tens of thousands of immigrants, Latinos and other supporters of an overhaul of the immigration system were gathering across the country on Wednesday to mark May 1 with marches, rallies and prayer vigils, hoping to show Congress that momentum is building in favor of a path to citizenship for 11 million immigrants in the country illegally.

Instead of concentrating their forces for one large demonstration on May Day, the immigrant and labor groups organizing the events said they chose to hold smaller actions in more than 100 cities to draw more local supporters. The demonstrations Wednesday follow a rally by supporters at the Capitol in Washington on April 10 that drew at least 30,000 people.

Planners said there would be an afternoon march through Birmingham, Ala.; a rally on the steps of the capitol in Denver; and a demonstration in downtown Kalamazoo, Mich., among dozens of other events. In Bozeman, Mont., organizers were promising a salsa lesson for protesters before a march to the public library.

Many immigrants who support overhaul legislation now before the Senate do not have legal immigration status, so they cannot travel easily across state lines and they think twice about turning out in public.

The PICO National Network, an organization of religious activist groups, said it would hold prayer vigils in coming days at the offices of lawmakers they hoped to persuade to vote for the immigration bill. On Wednesday, vigils were planned at the district offices of three Republicans in the House of Representatives: Mike Coffman in Aurora, Colo.; Jeff Denham in Modesto, Calif.; and Daniel Webster in Winter Garden, Fla., among others.

In mid-April, a bipartisan group of eight senators introduced a sweeping immigration bill, which includes a path to citizenship for immigrants here illegally as well as measures to tighten border security, clear backlogs in the legal immigration system, create new guest worker programs and expand visas for highly skilled immigrants.

Immigrant and Latino organizations have generally supported the bill, although they have criticized the length of the path to citizenship — 13 years for most illegal immigrants — and the many hurdles along the way, including fines and fees. The bill faces an uphill battle in the Senate, its sponsors acknowledge, and similar legislation would have an even harder time in the House.

In Tucson, 250 people turned out for a morning march in desert heat, accompanied by indigenous dancers and Mexican music. The marchers said the prospect of immigration action in Washington had created an upbeat mood in southern Arizona.

"There is hope for everyone," said Rosalva Fuentes, 43, an immigrant from Mexico who lives in Tucson. "Ten years ago people were so scared. Now we fight for equality."

Tomás Rodríguez, 41, said he had lived in Tucson for two decades without immigration papers, working in construction. Mr. Rodríguez, who attended with his 17-year-old daughter, Stephanie, a United States citizen, said he was not afraid to join the march. He said he understood that increased border security would probably be part of any measure to grant legal status to immigrants like him.

"I want to be a citizen," he said. "This is now my country. I've spent 20 years building for Americans. I want people to understand what I'm doing."

Leading organizers of the May 1 events included the Service Employees International Union and other labor unions; Mi Familia Vota, a Latino voter registration organization; and the Fair Immigration Reform Movement, a coalition of immigrant community groups.

"The big strategy is to point the people power of the movement towards getting Congress to finish the job in 2013," said Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the Center for Community Change, one of the main organizers. "Tremendous hope and expectation has been raised in the community."

Mr. Bhargava said supporters of the overhaul planned this year to focus their efforts more tightly on specific lawmakers who could influence the outcome of the vote. During the rallies on Wednesday, people would be asked to send letters and e-mail messages and make calls on their mobile phones to lawmakers as speeches were under way.

Eliseo Medina, a top official of the Service Employees International Union, spent the day in what he called "our war room" at its headquarters in Washington, monitoring the activities.

"We were not particularly looking to have huge events," Mr. Medina said. "We are going for expanding." He said organizers sought to have activities in as many districts as possible of the 435 lawmakers in the House of Representatives.

The union and its allies will issue a report card at the end of this year on support for the immigration legislation, Mr. Medina said. "People will know who deserves their support in 2014," he said. "I would dearly love to include some positive marks on Republicans."

In 2006, when major immigration legislation came before Congress, many hundreds of thousands of immigrants and advocates took to the streets in cities like Los Angeles and New York. But an overhaul bill by President George W. Bush failed in 2007. Since then, the Obama administration has deported more than 1.6 million people, making many immigrants wary of appearing in public.

Organizers said the May Day events would be an indication of whether the fear was subsiding and the passion of seven years ago was still there.