

THE HILL



Emanuel tries to scale back immigration expectations

By Sam Youngman
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Hours before President Obama was set to meet with members of Congress to discuss immigration reform, the president's chief of staff sought to lower expectations about when that reform might come to pass.

White House chief of staff and former Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.) said Thursday that reform might not happen this year, but it will get done.

"If it doesn't happen in the next two months, that doesn't mean it doesn't happen between now and then, before 2010," Emanuel said.

Emanuel, talking to reporters at a breakfast hosted by The Christian Science Monitor, said the Thursday afternoon meeting is the beginning of the process that will result in legislation the president can sign.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs caused a stir within the immigration activist community last week when he said the White House doesn't have the votes to pass immigration reform.

"One of the reasons you have the meeting is because the votes aren't there," Emanuel said. "If the votes are there, you don't even have the meeting, you got to a roll call."

On immigration and other Obama initiatives taking up a considerable amount of Congress's time, Emanuel said he is confident legislation can be passed this year, but he thinks it's as important to be discussing the major issues now.

"It's not impossible to do it this year," he said. "I think the more important thing is to get it started now."

Emanuel spent the majority of his opening remarks discussing the president's beleaguered healthcare reform proposals, expressing confidence that the president will have a bill to sign this year even as he conceded "we have a lot of hard slogging to go."

"I think we are in good shape," Emanuel said.

The former congressman said he sees two key numbers to winning the debate on healthcare "because this debate is about cost and coverage."

Emanuel said 14,000 people lose their insurance coverage every day, and each year the cost of healthcare grows by 10 percent.

Emanuel defended Obama's much-maligned public insurance proposal, stressing that the public plan would promote competition.

He also said Republicans howling about the cost of the proposal are missing the point because healthcare reform is "rearranging the dollars in the healthcare system."

"It's realigning it, reassigning it with the outcome that you'd like to see," he said.

Emanuel, who also worked in the Clinton White House, said he sees a different urgency surrounding the healthcare debate than he did when former President Clinton failed to get a bill through Congress.

"[Congress] knows that failure is not an option," Emanuel said. "That was not the mindset going into '03-'04."

Emanuel repeated the administration's insistence that the goal is not to pass healthcare reform through the reconciliation process.

"Our goal is to get it through the normal process," he said. "Reconciliation exists as a tool, but that is not the goal."