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## White House moves to placate immigration reform advocates

*A surprise appearance by President Obama at a meeting this week helps pacify some, but calls for action rather than oratory continue.*

By Teresa Watanabe  
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Immigrant rights activists said Friday that a White House meeting this week to reaffirm support for immigration reform – featuring a surprise appearance by President Obama – had helped mollify growing frustration over what some perceived as backpedaling on reform promises.

But many said that action will be needed to keep the faith among immigrants and their supporters, particularly Latinos who turned out in record numbers to help elect Obama last year.

“We’ve heard all of the beautiful oratory about immigration reform, but we have yet to see concrete actions to stop the suffering,” said Angelica Salas, director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.

Many give credit to the Obama administration for ending residential raids on illegal immigrants and improving conditions in detention centers. But Salas and others said dismay has mounted among immigrant advocates that reform has not moved forward and that the Obama administration has continued and even expanded controversial enforcement programs, such as those that track down illegal immigrants at worksites and in jails, and that authorize state and local police to enforce immigration law.

In addition, some advocates interpreted recent speeches by Obama in Mexico and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano in Texas as downplaying immigration reform.

A Homeland Security spokesman declined to comment on the frustration. In a statement, Napolitano said the meeting was “an important opportunity” to hear from those involved in the immigration debate.

At the White House meeting Thursday, both Obama and Napolitano reaffirmed their support for immigration reform to more than 100 representatives from labor, business, law enforcement, religious organizations and immigrant rights groups. The assembly broke into smaller groups to share ideas about how to address the main pieces of a comprehensive reform package: enforcement, guest workers, family visas and legalization of the nation’s estimated 11 million illegal immigrants.

In a teleconference call Friday, several attendants expressed satisfaction with the meeting as a good step forward.

Eun Sook Lee of the National Korean American Service & Educational Consortium in Los Angeles said she raised concerns about the continuing deportations of young people who could be eligible for legalization if Congress passed the so-called Dream Act granting that right to those bound for college or the military. White House officials said they would look into the issue, she said.

The meeting "kind of stopped the bleeding," said Frank Sharry of America's Voice, a Washington-based immigration reform group. "Going forward, we're going to have to see concrete actions and not just meetings."



May 1, 2009 - President Barack Obama and DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, with 24 members of the military sworn in as U.S. citizens.

It is far from certain, however, that reform can be passed next year.

Angelo Amador, executive director of immigration policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said business and labor were still divided over the best way to bring in guest workers for jobs unfilled by Americans.

And although the White House maintains that a comprehensive reform bill could be introduced this fall and possibly passed next year, top officials have told Latino leaders privately that it could take as long as two to four years, according to Antonio Gonzalez, president of the William C. Velasquez Institute, a

national Latino policy and research organization in Los Angeles.

The potential extended timeline has set off divergent reactions among Latino and immigrant rights activists, he said. Some are vowing to punish legislators at the ballot box next fall if they fail to enact comprehensive reform.

Others are urging patience, saying Obama's plate is already full with healthcare, climate change and other issues.

A position quietly gaining momentum, particularly among members of Congress, is to push early passage of a smaller bill, such as legalizing younger immigrants bound for college, as a "down payment" on reform, Gonzalez said.

"That logic is becoming more and more appealing," Gonzalez said. "People are going to get real nervous about going into an election cycle with nothing to show for immigration reform."

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