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February 06, 2004

Bush plan gets mixed response

By Alex Granados
Staff Writer

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Immigration experts and area Hispanic groups are showing a mix of skepticism and cautious optimism about President Bush's proposed immigration reforms, but some foreign workers say the plans will benefit them.

Although details are still unclear, the reforms will offer temporary work permits for people already in the United States and those living abroad, provided businesses cannot find U.S. workers to take the available jobs.

Many Hispanic groups in North Carolina are waiting to see what happens before passing judgment on the proposed reforms.

Angelina Schiavone, interim executive director for El Centro Hispano in Durham, says she cannot predict the impact of the reforms until the U.S. Congress addresses them.

"It really depends how it plays out in the end, whether it is going to be positive," she said.

But Schiavone said she is pleased with some prospective aspects of the reforms, such as the new freedoms of immigrant workers to travel to and from their home countries. She said she also likes the fact that foreign workers would have the same rights as U.S. workers.

Still, former immigration attorney Robert Miller, said he is skeptical about the potential impact of the reforms.

Miller was an immigration attorney when former President Bill Clinton's own immigration legislation passed. Considered an amnesty, it allowed many illegal immigrants to stay in the country.

Miller said Clinton's legislation had very little impact on immigrants. He also said he doubts any legislation following Bush's speech will have a more substantial effect because people who have been breaking

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immigration laws might be hesitant to approach authorities.

"These people were not about to go to a cop to find out about the program," he said.

He also said that it is difficult for the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services to enforce rules effectively on who can and cannot stay in the country because it has the dual responsibility of letting immigrants in and also keeping them out.

"The immigration service is, without a doubt, the most schizophrenic service ever conceived," he said.

Criticisms of Bush's proposal do not end with Miller. Kim Bobo, executive director of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, said in order for the reforms to work, some problems must be addressed first.

Bobo said that under the new policy, the workers effectively have no rights because employers can fire immigrants if they assert themselves, which could cause them to be deported.

"They have got to separate the question of visas from employers," she said.

Despite the lack of specifics and the potential problems with the reforms, some immigrants are optimistic that the changes will help.

Jorge Campo, a 32-year-old construction worker who has lived in Carrboro for about ten years, said Bush's proposals would benefit him and others like him. "It is better for everyone here," he said.

Since he moved from Mexico, Campo says, he has run into a lot of employment-related problems, and he said he thinks the current system is flawed.

"There are a lot of problems," he said. "We have been a long time here, and there is really no pay at all."

Contact the State & National Editor at stntdesk@unc.edu.



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