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POLITICS

Trump Proposes New Immigration Plan Based on Worker Skills

U.S. leader calls it a 'common sense' plan that 'builds upon our nation's rich history of immigration'



Under President Trump's immigration proposal, some 600,000 visas would be issued with employment in mind, up from what may currently be around 140,000. PHOTO: ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Louise Radnofsky and Vivian Salama

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WASHINGTON—President Trump outlined his administration's new immigration proposal in a Rose Garden address on Thursday, declaring it a “common sense” plan that “builds upon our nation's rich history of immigration.”

“Our proposal is pro-American, pro-immigrant and pro-worker,” Mr. Trump told a crowd of lawmakers and other dignitaries gathered at the White House. “This plan was not developed,

I'm sorry to say, by politicians. It was designed with significant input by our law-enforcement professionals.”

Democrats remain largely unified in opposition to the broad tenets of the Trump administration immigration policy, including the way it addresses issues at the southern border. Border security will be addressed in some way in the administration's proposals, according to a senior administration official, though scant details have been released.

Among some of the top priorities outlined by Mr. Trump is curbing the flow of drugs and contraband. His administration also wants to bolster funding for infrastructure at the border, which he said was “greatly underfunded and woefully inadequate.”

Mr. Trump also described three skills-based categories for what he intends to brand the “Build America Visa”: workers with extraordinary talent, workers in sought-after specialized vocations, and exceptional students.

He also added that restoring the “integrity of our broken asylum system” remains a priority.

“These are frivolous claims to gain admission into our country,” he said of certain asylum seekers, adding that his plan looks to expedite screening “for legitimate asylum seekers by weeding out meritless claims.”

The U.S. grants about 1.1 million visas a year and the administration says it plans to hold that level steady.

Mr. Trump added that he wants to ensure that America remains a “welcoming country” to immigrants, but a big proportion of those immigrants must come in through merit and skill.

“This plan will bring us in line with other countries and at the same time, make us globally competitive,” he said. “We will keep our communities safe. Americans can have complete and total confidence that under our plan borders will finally be fully secured.”

Under the plan, the allocation of visas will be more explicitly tied to jobs, and be less based on family ties, refugee admissions or the existing diversity lottery. Some 600,000 visas would be offered with employment in mind, up from what may currently be around 140,000.

The administration has also identified three skills-based categories for what it intends to dub the Build America Visa: workers with extraordinary talent, workers in sought-after specialized vocations and exceptional students, according to people familiar with the ideas.

But the process of drafting any legislation that could include the proposal is still in its early stages, a senior administration official said Wednesday.

The senior administration official described the rollout as an opportunity primarily to establish a Republican consensus on immigration. The party is currently divided on the issue, as are Democrats.

Democrats remain relatively unified in opposition to the broad tenets of the Trump administration immigration policy, including emotive issues around the southern border. Border security is slated for inclusion in some way in the administration's proposals, though scant details have been made available, according to the senior administration official.

"This policy is shameful and inhumane, and we will oppose it in the strongest possible terms," said Halie Soifer, executive director of the Jewish Democratic Council of America.

The same administration official said constituencies that have bipartisan support, such as young immigrants brought illegally to the U.S. as children, could find provisions addressing their fate in a later iteration of the proposal.

The plan doesn't address the issue of how to handle adults who enter the U.S. illegally with children. The administration backed away from separating them as a matter of policy last year but officials have said that some adults are still separated from children they travel with over safety concerns.

The administration hasn't committed to what share of those skills-based visas will go to each of the three categories identified by Mr. Trump. That would almost certainly prompt a spirited discussion over the merits of engineers versus welders, farmworkers versus entrepreneurs, and potentially pit Silicon Valley against other economic sectors.

The White House has yet to define what an exceptional student might look like, potentially drawing itself into a debate with the higher-education sector. Nor has it set explicit criteria for weighing broad factors such as age and education in visa applications, only saying that it wants to favor applicants who already have a U.S. job offer.

More broadly, some industry leaders will likely argue that businesses are better placed to decide on their needs than the government. All of this will take place against a backdrop of

immigration restrictionists arguing that U.S. wages can only rise in a tight job market if legal immigration is cut entirely.

Democrats, meanwhile, have indicated that they want to fight for the existing visa routes used by immigrant families to bring to the U.S. their spouses, minor children, as well as their siblings, parents and other relatives.

The diversity visa lottery, which allocates around 50,000 visas a year to immigrants from countries that don't have a strong presence in the U.S., also has a dedicated constituency. The Trump administration plans to eliminate it under the new proposal.

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