

Hispanic Christians Press Lawmakers on Immigration Reform

With a July 4 deadline looming for an immigration reform vote on Capitol Hill, politicians and clergy at the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast Thursday pushed lawmakers to reach common ground.

“It’s the right thing to do, it’s the Christian thing to do but it’s also an incredibly practical thing to do,” said Vice President Joe Biden, addressing about 550 attendees.

He cited a Congressional Budget Office analysis of the Senate immigration bill that showed that reform would reduce the federal deficit by \$197 billion in the first decade after the bill’s passage, and \$700 billion after 20 years.

Many of the leaders attending the breakfast at the end of the three-day biennial conference had spent the previous day on Capitol Hill pressing for passage of immigration reform.

“We’ve been at this for a long time and we see it as the best opportunity we’ve had in a long time,” said the Rev. Luis Cortes, president of Esperanza, a national Hispanic organization that hosted the biennial breakfast. “If we can’t get it moving forward now, it means we will remain in this strange situation for years to come.”

The predominantly evangelical group drew both Democrats (Biden and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi) and Republicans (Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington and Sen. John Cornyn of Texas).

Cornyn agreed that reform was necessary, citing people who have died trying to cross U.S. borders or been pressed into

sexual slavery when they reached this country. But he cited different statistics from the CBO, which said that the proposed Senate bill would cut illegal immigration only by 25 percent. "Obviously, it needs some work," he said.

The Rev. Becky Keenan, co-pastor of Gulf Meadows Church in Houston, said immigrants are aware that with reform comes responsibility. "We want to enjoy the benefits of this nation and do not expect a free ride, only an equal opportunity," she said in a prayer at the gathering.

Another Texas pastor who attended the breakfast said she is hopeful for a meeting of minds at the Capitol after seeing a member of her church get deported and his American-born children follow him to Mexico.

"I don't believe that either extreme has the answer or it's such a great problem that it can't be solved," said the Rev. Corina Zuniga, pastor of Fuente de Agua Viva (Fountain of Living Waters) church in Pasadena, Texas. "But we have to come to that common ground where we can find a place that can be a start."