

In New Retreat, Senate Restores Food Stamps for Legal Immigrants

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By LIZETTE ALVAREZ

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WASHINGTON, May 12 — The Senate today voted to restore food stamps to a quarter of a million legal immigrants and refugees, retreating from some of the provisions of the 1996 welfare overhaul law.

The restoration is part of an agreement between the two chambers and is expected to pass the House. It would be the second time in a year that Congress had backtracked on the landmark welfare law, which has been criticized as unduly harsh to immigrants.

The measure passed overwhelmingly — 92 to 8 — despite a Republican broadside from Senator Phil Gramm of Texas, who contended that it would lure immigrants to the United States for the wrong reasons.

Lawmakers have been under considerable political pressure from President Clinton, Republican governors and immigrant groups to restore some aid to legal immigrants since the welfare law cut them off the rolls.

Last year Congress voted to reinstate Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income to some immigrants as part of the balanced-budget agreement, but food stamps were not part of the package.

The House is expected to take up the provision in the next few weeks, as part of a larger agricultural research and crop insurance bill. It faces slight opposition among conservatives who object to both the food stamp and agricultural research provisions.

"With this action, we have reaffirmed our compassion and our priority for taking care of the most vulnerable in our society," Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, the ranking Democrat on the Agriculture Committee, said in his opening remarks. "The bill takes a major step toward fulfilling a promise that was made by our President and many of us here in the Congress on both sides of the aisle to correct inequities made in the 1996 Welfare Reform Act."

The provision, which would cost \$816 million over five years, would restore food stamps to about 250,000

legal immigrants — children, the elderly and the disabled — who were dropped from the program in 1996. The measure would be paid for in large part through cuts in what the Federal Government pays states to run the food stamp program.

To qualify for the nutrition benefits, immigrants must have been living in the United States on Aug. 22, 1996, the day Mr. Clinton signed the law (after vetoing two earlier versions). Those who arrived after that date would not be entitled to food stamps.

The measure would also enable refugees and people who have received asylum in the United States to receive nutrition benefits for seven years, instead of five. Refugees are in a separate category from legal immigrants because they are classified as victims of political persecution.

Before the welfare overhaul, legal immigrants constituted 1.8 million of the 25 million food stamp recipients, a number that dropped to about 800,000 after the bill became law.

The sharp drop in the number of legal immigrants entitled to benefits, many of whom had lived and worked in the United States for years, prompted unrelenting criticism from immigrant groups who asserted that noncitizens had been unfairly singled out. The nation's governors joined in the campaign, fearing they would have to shoulder a larger share of the financial burden.

The President, responding to the outcry, promised to work to restore many of the lost benefits. And Republicans, concerned about further alienating Hispanic voters, agreed to revisit the welfare legislation, one of

their proudest achievements in 1996.

Last week a prominent human rights group added to the chorus of opposition when it drew attention to a new study showing hunger among immigrants in three states at "alarmingly high" levels. The group, Physicians for Human Rights, urged Congress to pass the food stamp provision.

To underscore the Senate's commitment, 75 Democrats and Republicans signed a letter to Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, the majority leader, asking him to restore the benefits and bring the bill to the Senate floor. Despite his own reservations about the measure, Mr. Lott acquiesced.

Today it was Senator Gramm who led the opposition to the bill, persuading seven other Republicans to vote with him against the measure. They were Senators Judd Gregg and Robert C. Smith of New Hampshire, Jesse Helms of North Carolina, James M. Inhofe and Don Nickles of Oklahoma, Jon Kyl of Arizona and Jeff Sessions of Alabama.

Debating the measure on the Senate floor, Mr. Gramm reminded his colleagues that Americans enthusiastically support the welfare revisions and do not necessarily endorse any tinkering. Mr. Gramm also argued that changes in the law would simply tempt freeloading immigrants to come to the United States.

This bill puts up "a neon sign that says, 'Come to America and get welfare,'" the Senator said.

"That's what's wrong with this bill," he continued. "We need to let people with a new vision and new energy come to America, legally, but with their sleeves rolled up, ready to go to work, rather than with their hands held out."

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