

Denham pushes for vote on ENLIST immigration reform

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By DONNA CASSATA



FILE -- In this July 23, 2013 file photo is Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Calif., testifying on Capitol Hill in Washington, before the House Judiciary subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security hearing; "Addressing the Immigration Status of Illegal Immigrants Brought to the United States as Children". Denham, whose district is in California's agricultural heartland of the San Joaquin Valley, is not worried that Congress' failure to pass immigration legislation will hurt his reelection.

EVAN VUCCI,FILE — AP Photo

WASHINGTON — Defying House Republican leaders, Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, on Monday moved toward forcing an election-year decision on his immigration legislation.

Denham filed his bill, known as the ENLIST Act, as an amendment to the sweeping defense policy measure that the House will consider this week. The measure would create a path to citizenship for immigrants who were brought illegally to the U.S. as children and serve in the military.

The bill "provides an avenue for those who want to perform the ultimate act of patriotism serving their county to earn legal status," Denham said in a statement. "As a veteran, I can think of no better way to demonstrate your commitment to our nation."

His move comes three days after House GOP leaders took steps to block a vote on the immigration legislation, dealing a significant blow to efforts to overhaul a system widely disparaged as dysfunctional.

The Rules Committee will decide on Tuesday what amendments the House will consider and vote on as part of its work on the National Defense Authorization Act.

Doug Heye, spokesman for House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, said on Friday: "No proposed ENLIST amendments to NDAA will be made in order."

The GOP-led Rules panel rarely breaks with the leadership, following its wishes.

The Senate passed a comprehensive bill last year that would boost border security, remake legal worker programs and offer a path to citizenship to the estimated 11.5 million people now living here illegally. That bill remains stalled in the Republican-led House where Speaker John Boehner has blamed GOP distrust of President Barack Obama to enforce any law for the inaction.

Despite a wide coalition of business, labor, religious groups, farmers and others pushing for an immigration overhaul, many individual Republican House members who represent largely white districts have been unmoved. That's particularly true in an election year amid concerns about angering core GOP voters.

Denham's measure was widely popular and seen as perhaps the likeliest area for compromise on the divisive issue of immigration.

Denham's bill would allow immigrants who were brought to this country on or before Dec. 31, 2011, and were younger than 15 years old to become legal, permanent residents the first step toward citizenship through honorable service in the military.

It was co-sponsored by 50 House members, 26 Democrats and 24 Republicans, but an outspoken minority was opposed. Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Ala., had warned that "all hell will break loose" if Denham tried to promote the measure.