



WHITE HOUSE

Trump administration eyes mandatory employment checks for immigration plan

BY FRANCO ORDOÑEZ

MAY 09, 2019 10:30 AM



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Three months after the Trump Organization began using a federal program to check whether new employees were legally allowed to work at its golf clubs and resorts, the White House is strongly considering a proposal to implement the program nationwide.

The plan to institute a mandatory federal employment verification program, known as E-Verify, would be a key part of an immigration overhaul crafted by a team led by Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law and adviser.

According to three sources familiar with the immigration discussions, the White House has been considering pushing for mandatory employment checks as part of the enforcement measures of the new immigration package.

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“The plan is taking shape, it’s imminent, you have the two tracks, however there is a massive reform contained in the enforcement side of E-Verify to calm concerns on the right over the lack of reduction of immigration numbers on the skills side,” a person familiar with the plan said.

Kushner unveiled the broad strokes of the new immigration plan to congressional Republicans on Tuesday. It included an updated legal immigration system that replaces allowing entry to low-skilled workers with a merit-based system that prioritizes immigrants with special skills. It would also strengthen border security, increase interior enforcement and tighten asylum procedures.

The White House declined to address the E-Verify proposal, but a senior White House official told McClatchy the priority was on stopping illegal entry into the country and protecting Americans.

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“The illegal immigration portion of the current framework is focused on ensuring a completely and permanently secure southern border, stopping visa overstays, and protecting public safety,” the senior White House official said.

Kushner has been [working for months with a small group studying specific ways](#) to redistribute employment visas and also leading “listening sessions” with dozens of interest groups important to Trump to see if there was a position that Republicans can rally around before the 2020 elections.

The growing crisis on the border forced Kushner to broaden his focus when Trump reshuffled his White House immigration team, [tapped senior aide Stephen Miller to lead on immigration](#) and asked Kushner to incorporate more enforcement measures into his broader plan focused on legal immigration.

Last month was especially turbulent in federal agencies that handle immigration, when within one week, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen resigned and Ron Vitiello’s nomination to lead Immigration and Customs Enforcement was pulled. A senior administration official claimed U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the Department of Homeland Security agency that handles legal immigration, “dropped the ball” for not taking steps to more rigorously scrutinize asylum cases.

The White House immigration plan is unlikely to pass muster in Congress where Democrats will be reluctant to support any enforcement proposal that’s not offset with significant legalization of immigrants currently in the United States without authorization to work. Democrats are working on legislation to protect so-called Dreamers who were brought into the country illegally as children.

But those close to the White House talks have said that would be okay if the end result is finding a plan that important Republican factions can get behind in the lead up to the 2020 elections.

Eric Trump, one of the president’s sons and executive vice president of the Trump Organization, announced in January that all Trump properties would be instituting E-Verify after claims that some of the company’s workers were in the country illegally.

The Trump team can now point to E-Verify as an example of practicing what it preaches, said Dan Stein, president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which has long called for the implementation of E-Verify. But citing former Vice President Joe Biden’s rise in Democratic polling and his appeal to working class Americans, Stein said ultimately Trump must show that he’s willing to fight harder for the American worker.

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“The president needs to win 2020. It means the president can’t go out there with a proposal that is going to be a sop to cheap labor interest,” Stein said. “Instead, he has to try and stand on the side of the working people in this country. The only way you can own and control this issue in 2020 is with proposals that you can directly point to that stop the unfair labor competition associated with illegal immigration..

The business community has long been resistant to the idea of being forced to determine whether their employees are in the country legally. The agriculture industry has been particularly concerned about the implementation of E-Verify without a workable guest worker program that ensures farmers get the seasonal workers they need.

The American Farm Bureau Federation [estimates that an enforcement-only immigration plan](#) that includes mandatory E-Verify, would cause farm production to drop by \$60 billion and food prices to rise 5 percent to 6 percent.

Leon Fresco, who served as deputy assistant attorney general for the Office of Immigration Litigation in the Obama administration, said many businesses simply won’t accept E-Verify unless the government also deals with the 11 million people already living in the country illegally.

“If they include mandatory E-Verify that doesn’t address the legal status of people here, that will earn the scorn of the business community who do not want to be put in a position to terminate many workers who are currently in a quasi-legal status on their books,” Fresco said.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which lobbied Congress against a national E-Verify mandate during much of the Bush and Obama administrations and fought to stop Arizona’s law requiring E-Verify in 2010, has [since welcomed the idea as long as](#) it includes an improved guest worker proposal.

The National Association of Manufacturers [handed the administration a report](#) earlier this year arguing 500,000 jobs in manufacturing need to be filled, but also supported a mandatory employment verification system like E-Verify.

Robyn Boerstling who oversees immigration for NAM said many members already use E-Verify. But, she added that what they need is a more uniform, reliable and efficient system that preempts state laws and limits employer liability.

“Manufacturers want to do the right thing. We really believe in the right way of doing things,” Boerstling said. “It goes back to wanting to have something that is easy to use. Our members, manufacturers do not want to break the law or be employing undocumented labor at their workplaces.”

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Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, supports the implementation of E-Verify, but questioned whether the White House is actually seeking to get legislation passed or is making more of a campaign statement for Republicans to rally around. He would support the measures as they've been described to him, but he has little faith they will continue to look the same once negotiations begin with Democrats.

“The bill will only get worse from here,” he said. “Anything introduced is going to move in the direction of the people you're negotiating with. That is why you start with a bill that is much more ambitious than this one and then settle for something that might look like this.”

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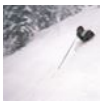
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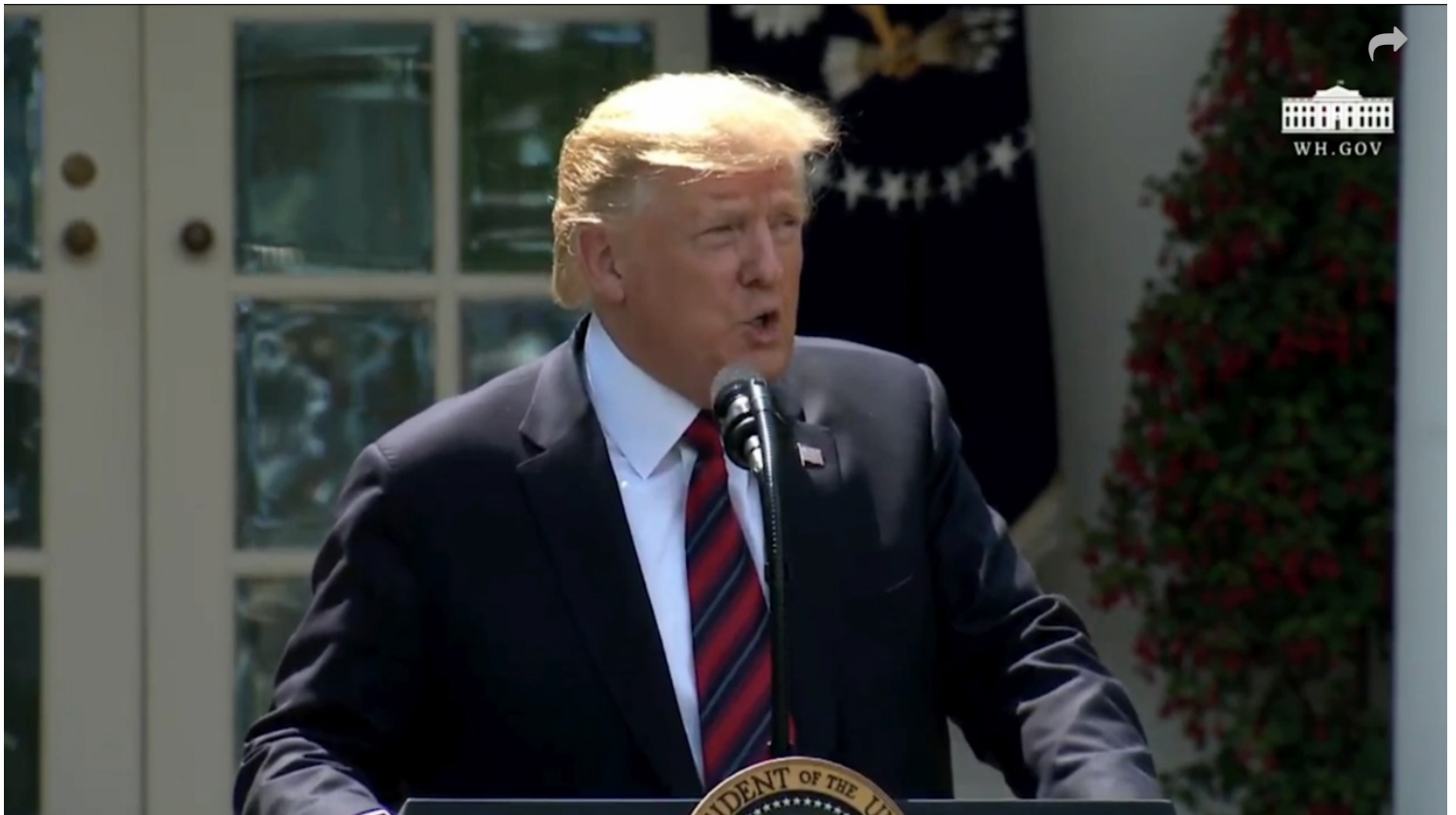
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