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Immigration forum gets a mixed review

Discussion called informative; others complain they had no chance to speak.

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Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND -- A U.S. House GOP immigration forum held here Tuesday afternoon drew a mixed reaction from the public and seemed to hold at least one surprise for the three congressmen presiding over it.

The forum, organized by 2nd District Rep. Chris Chocola as a follow-up to a Ways and Means Committee immigration hearing held last month in Washington, included Rep. Steve Buyer of Indiana's 4th District and Rep. Jim McCrery, R-La. House Republican committees are holding at least two dozen immigration forums this summer in various parts of the country.

"Each of you has the experience of immigrants in your daily lives," Chocola told an audience of about 70 at the County-City Building. The forum, he continued, was designed to "get the experience of people here in our community in conjunction with the hearings in Washington and around the country."



U.S. Rep. Chris Chocola, R-Bristol, center, accompanied by U.S. Rep. Jim McCrery, R-La., left, and U.S. Rep. Steve Buyer, R-Ind., listens to experts from Social Security, Medicare and welfare programs during a forum to examine border security and immigration impacts at the County-City Building on Tuesday.

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Five panelists invited to speak were from health care, business and social services sectors. Much of the discussion among the congressmen and the panelists seemed to focus on the problems facing Indiana's health care system.

Asked if tightening border security would help solve overcrowding and financial

problems faced by emergency medical care departments, both Dr. Randy Thompson, medical director of emergency medicine at St. Anthony Memorial Hospital in Michigan City, and Dr. David Van Ryn, medical director of emergency medicine at Elkhart General Hospital, replied that it would, but minimally.

"Border security is a must but doesn't make a big difference," Thompson said. He said illegal immigrants already in the country and the uninsured would continue to affect the system.

Thompson also said the problems facing the health care system go beyond immigration.

"We have to keep our doors open," he said of emergency care departments. "We don't care if (patients) have money or insurance."

Asked if he would consider screening emergency care patients to determine their eligibility or legal status, he replied, "My job as a physician is that I'm here to take care of a patient. I don't care what color they are, or if they're legal or illegal."

His statement drew applause from some audience members and seemed to put the three congressmen on the defensive.

Thompson also said that unless people in general can pay for medical services, enforcing immigration laws alone will not make much difference, to which Buyer replied, "I'm a little stunned here."

Other aspects of the discussion centered on an employee verification system or a pilot program designed to verify the legal status of job applicants.

Edward Nelson, president of Indiana Packers Corp., a pork processing operation based in Delphi, Ind., said the system has worked for his company, and he thinks that all employers should be required to use it in order to cut down on employment of illegal immigrants.

James Martin, regional commissioner of the Social Security Administration, said the administration's workload is expected to increase dramatically with baby boomers reaching their retirement years and with changes in immigration laws. He talked about the problems in meeting such changes.

Mitch Roob, secretary of the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, stressed the current need to reform the FSSA system in order to provide a "responsible and accountable system for Indiana taxpayers." He also said that in certain cases Indiana currently provides some social services to illegal immigrants.

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Audience members had mixed reactions to the forum.

"Very informative," Greg Serbon said. Serbon, who is with the Indiana Federation for Immigration Reform and Enforcement, said he had attended the forum "to find out the exact costs (of illegal immigration) for emergency medical services."

Serbon said he is a supporter of the House's enforcement-first approach to immigration reform.

Shelly Haggerty, communications director for Communities United to Strengthen America, said she believed some members of Congress are trying to blame health care problems on immigrants.

"The rising issue is the uninsured," she explained.

Jennifer Roth, a Mishawaka resident and a member of Michiana Immigrant Coalition, said, "We can talk about all the negative impacts of immigration all we want, but until we compare it against the benefits then we aren't really seeing the true benefit cost analysis of immigration."

A group of some 25 people, led by the Rev. Christopher Cox of St. Adalbert Catholic Church, met Tuesday evening at St. Adalbert School during an impromptu news conference to respond to the immigration forum.

"I was very disappointed that the group of people there were not diverse," said South Bend resident Nancy Flores, 40, of the panelists invited to the forum.

Several also said they were disappointed that no one in the audience was given a chance to comment or ask a question during the forum.

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