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# Immigration bill would touch Blount families if passed by Congress

By Joel Davis | (joeld@thedailytimes.com)

The effects of a far-reaching new immigration bill would be felt locally if makes it through the U.S. Congress.

U.S. Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and three other lawmakers sponsored the bill to boost border security, fix legal immigration programs and eventually grant citizenship to some 11 million people here illegally.

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Pastor Juan Hernandez, of the Hispanic Ministry at Our Lady of

Fatima Catholic Church in Alcoa, said immigration reform is very important.

“This legislation could change the lives of many in my congregation,” he said. “I hope that as the senators discuss the bill they will work to make a pathway to citizenship that is inclusive of all 11 million undocumented immigrants, including those who came here more recently and working families. Some in my congregation would struggle to meet the financial requirements for legalization, but this is a huge step in the right direction.”

Hernandez ministers to between 150 to 200 Hispanic families. “I would say around a good 70 percent would be helped by the new law.”

The Hispanic Ministry at Our Lady of Fatima is about nine years old. “In my ministry, I take care of people’s lives, and I also help them with basic things that they need and sometimes to pay their rent because they are behind. Whatever I can to do make their life easier.”

The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) released a statement that calls the legislation “an excellent starting point that recognizes the values of citizenship, workers’ rights, and family unity, and TIRRC will advocate to protect and advance these components as the legislation moves forward.

“TIRRC is deeply concerned with provisions that make the pathway to citizenship more difficult through arbitrary triggers, long waits, and high costs, as well as by provisions that may leave many immigrants out altogether — including LGBTQ family members, those charged with nonviolent criminal offenses, and immigrants who arrived after the cut-off date.”

The immigration bill received its first test at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Friday, where opponents of the legislation faced off with its authors.

The 844-page legislation was introduced around 2 a.m. Wednesday, so critics say there has been insufficient time to digest it and are pushing for more hearings and a long review process. Friday’s hearing is the first of two the Judiciary Committee is expected to hold on the bill before it begins amending and voting on it next month.

“We’re on the beginning of a process we think must be done. We can’t have 11 million people living in the shadows forever in this country,” Sen. John McCain, another of the bill’s sponsors, said Friday.

“And obviously, people who came to this country illegally should pay a penalty — but not forever. And they should pay back taxes, and they should pay a fine. We should make sure that they get in

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line behind everybody else. But this issue has to be resolved,” McCain, R-Ariz., said on CBS “This Morning.”

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano has been invited to testify, and she’s sure to face tough questions from Sessions and other Republicans on conditions along the border, which the Obama administration says is more secure than ever.

Some Republicans disagree and also contend the immigration bill doesn’t do enough to improve border security, even though it requires certain enforcement steps to be taken before any path to citizenship can begin.

Napolitano in the past has criticized the idea of border enforcement “triggers” as a condition to a path to citizenship, putting the Obama administration at odds with the bipartisan Senate plan. But President Barack Obama praised the legislation when it was released this week.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*