

## **GROUPS FIGHT STIMULUS LIMIT ON WORKERS WITH H-1B VISAS**

By Chris Strohm

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Business groups and immigration advocates hope to remove a controversial provision from the Senate's economic stimulus bill that would restrict companies receiving federal bailout funds from hiring highly skilled foreign workers.

The provision was offered by Senate Finance ranking member Charles Grassley and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., as an amendment to the Senate stimulus bill and approved by voice vote Friday.

It would place limits on any company receiving funds under the \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program from hiring skilled foreign workers under the H-1B visa program.

The provision is primarily intended to prevent financial institutions from replacing laid off workers with foreigners.

"Wall Street caused the crisis, millions of people lost jobs, including 100,000 in financial institutions. Now they want to bring in foreign workers," Sanders said. "Talk about adding insult to injury."

But the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the American Immigration Lawyers Association have united in opposition to the measure.

Writing to senators to oppose the provision, top officials of the two groups said the amendment "will hurt immigrant workers, the businesses they work for, and the economy."

"U.S. businesses who are trying desperately to recover financially MUST have access to specialty skills inside our country, so they can keep their businesses in the U.S.," according to the letter, which was sent by R. Bruce Josten, the Chamber's vice president for government affairs, and Jeanne Butterfield, executive director of the lawyers association.

A lobbying blitz will be made to try to kill the provision when Senate and House lawmakers negotiate a final stimulus bill in conference, a Chamber official added.

Companies would still be able to hire workers through the H-1B program. But under the Grassley-Sanders language, they must actively recruit U.S. workers, ensure they do not displace American workers and ensure that American workers are not laid off in favor of foreign workers.

Grassley and other advocates say the intention is to ensure that U.S. workers are given priority in hiring.

"With the unemployment rate at 7.6 percent, there is no need for companies to hire foreign guest workers through the H1-B program when there are plenty of qualified Americans looking for jobs," Grassley said. "Our common-sense amendment simply ensures that recipients of American taxpayer money make American workers their first priority as they look to hire new employees."

Josten and Butterfield wrote that foreign workers make up a very small percentage of the total workforce at financial institutions. They said major U.S. financial institutions hired only up to 0.74 percent of foreigners under the H-1B program in 2007.

"At a time when the economy is striving to rebound, barring U.S. companies access to the most qualified job applicants, particularly those coming out of U.S. graduate programs, will hinder recovery," they said.