

Schumer begins groundwork for sweeping reform bill

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By [Chris Strohm](#)

Senate Judiciary Immigration Subcommittee Chairman **Charles Schumer**, D-N.Y., launched an aggressive effort today to press for passage this year of comprehensive immigration legislation, saying conditions are ripe for congressional action. Schumer announced an agenda of hearings for the coming months and said he is "cautiously optimistic that we can pass strong, fair, practical and effective immigration reform this year." The series of hearings are being called "the road to immigration reform in 2009: clearing the hurdles," he said.

Not so fast, countered Senate Judiciary ranking member **Jeff Sessions**. As the newly minted top Republican on the Judiciary Committee, Sessions will be a key player in crafting any immigration reform bill. Perhaps foreshadowing the debate likely to play out on the panel over an immigration measure, Sessions said, "We are not there yet."

Immigration reform advocates want to see Congress pass legislation overhauling the nation's immigration laws and giving an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States a legal path to stay in the country. Past efforts to pass a comprehensive bill have failed and opponents of reform have stipulated that beefed-up border security is needed before legislation can succeed.

Schumer argued today that the demands have been met, including the expansion of a Border Patrol force that has 20,000 agents. He said "the American people need to know" that U.S. borders are "considerably more secure" than in previous years. And he fired questions at witnesses from the Homeland Security Department to make his case. Schumer asked officials from the Border Patrol, Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement if border security efforts since 2005 have been successful in "significantly lowering" illegal immigration and making the borders "exponentially more secure." All three witnesses answered yes.

"For years now, opponents of immigration reform have continually promised that they will engage in a conversation about immigration reform once Congress showed it was serious about securing the border," Schumer said. "Our witnesses will confirm today that showing has clearly been made." He also cited department statistics that the number of people caught illegally entering the country has decreased by 27 percent compared to last year.

But critics contend that the statistic does not take into account those who successfully evaded border agents and made it into the country. Sessions said he has questions about the Obama administration's commitment to enforcing the nation's immigration laws. "We are making some good progress. The question is will we continue it," he said. "I see some good things happening. I see some things that are troubling." He expressed concern that the administration does not appear to be deporting undocumented workers at the same rate that the Bush administration did.

On a related front, a report released today by the nonpartisan Police Foundation criticized efforts to have local law enforcement agencies enforce federal immigration laws. The group said the report “finds that immigration enforcement by local police undermines their core public safety mission, diverts scarce resources, increases their exposure to liability and litigation, and exacerbates fear in communities already distrustful of police.”