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State's senators disagree on immigration reform

DeMint says illegals should start over; Graham favors bringing them 'out of the shadows'

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WASHINGTON BUREAU

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WASHINGTON -- The Senate's debate on immigration has turned into a contentious issue around the country and for members of South Carolina's congressional delegation.

GOP U.S. Sens. Jim DeMint and Lindsey Graham agree on the need for tighter border security but disagree on how the nation should deal with the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the United States.

Upstate House members Bob Inglis, R-Travelers Rest, and Gresham Barrett, R-Westminster, voted in December for a bill that focused on greater border security and tougher enforcement of immigration laws without creating a guest worker program.

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Barrett said he had concerns and complaints from constituents during the congressional March break.

"Illegal immigration needs to be split into two separate but equally important issues," he said. "First being security and enforcement -- after all, why bail the water out if you aren't going to plug the holes?"

Inglis called the House bill a step toward immigration reform, but said Congress needed to do more. He supports a guest worker program but opposes amnesty for illegal immigrants. But he could support provisions in the Senate Judiciary Committee bill to allow illegal immigrants to work toward citizenship because "they earn their way out of the violation after a period of time."

Inglis spent much of last year discussing immigration with residents, business owners and government leaders. Conclusions from those discussions have been posted on his congressional Web site.

Graham supports the Senate Judiciary Committee bill that would increase the number of guest work visas, increase the number of Border Patrol agents and give temporary legal status to undocumented immigrants in the United States before 2004 if they meet certain conditions.

Sen. Jim DeMint said the bill would reward people who violated U.S. immigration laws.

"That's the wrong message for a nation of laws," DeMint said.

One bill he supports would require undocumented immigrants to return to their homelands and apply to enter the United States legally. Immigrant guest workers in the United States legally could work here on visas for two years before having to return to their home countries where they would have to stay for a year. They could renew the visas twice.

Graham said it's unrealistic to expect 12 million people to leave the United States voluntarily and the government would be hard pressed to track them all down. He said the possibility of gaining legal status by working for it would bring illegal immigrants "out of the shadows."
