

# Churches push hard on last-minute legislation

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December 6, 2010

WASHINGTON (RNS) With three weeks left before the 111th Congress adjourns, faith groups are mounting a full court press on Capitol Hill on a number of bills, including a nuclear treaty with Russia and an immigration bill.

Advocates are pressing for action on The DREAM Act, which would allow illegal immigrants to gain citizenship through military service or a college education, and the START nuclear treaty with Russia.

Churches and other religious groups scored an early victory on Thursday (Dec. 2) when the House passed the Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill, which devotes \$4.5 billion to child nutrition programs over 10 years, following Senate passage in August.

More than 10,000 people from Christian, Jewish and Muslim organizations have enlisted supporters to call senators to pass the DREAM Act, which has already passed the House.

"People from across the faith communities would agree that we've waited too long already to pass the DREAM Act," said Kristin Ford, a spokeswoman at the Washington-based group Faith in Public Life.

Groups are rallying around Bernard Pastor, an 18-year-old Ohio high

school graduate who came with his family from Guatemala at age 3 and faces possible deportation without the path to citizenship outlined in the DREAM Act.

"Every year, 65,000 Bernards graduate from high school and face the threat of being deported," said the Rev. Troy Jackson, a Cincinnati pastor who is rallying supporters behind Pastor's case. "If the Senate wants to talk about tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, and not address the DREAM act for people like Bernard, then their priorities are not in line with the vast majority of Americans."

Meanwhile, the conservative Family Research Council is lobbying for an extension of Bush-era tax cuts that are scheduled to expire on Dec. 31. The Washington-based group supports a plan by Senate Republicans to hold up all other legislation, including the DREAM Act, until the tax cuts are extended.

"The days of kicking Senate Republicans around are over," the FRC said. "Without 60 votes the Democrats are powerless to move anything on their social agenda."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism are pushing the Senate to approve a new START Treaty with Russia to limit U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles. Senate Republicans, led by Arizona's Jon Kyle, say the treaty needs more debate.

"The church's concern for nuclear weapons grows out of its commitment to the sanctity of human life," said Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., in a Nov. 29 letter to the Senate.

Stephen M. Colecchi, director of bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace, said the U.S. and Russia have been in limbo for more than a year since the last START Treaty expired.

"It will make our world and nation safer the sooner a verification process is back in place," said Colecchi.

Colecchi said action needs to happen before a new Senate takes office in early January.

"This is the Senate to which the treaty was submitted, and they are the ones who have had the hearings concerning the treaty," said Colecchi. "If they wait until next year, there will be a new Senate, and the new Senate would have to go through the same process."