



Obama administration held dozens of meetings on food stamps with Mexican officials

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The Obama administration met with Mexican officials and held other events to discuss enrollment in food stamps and similar programs roughly 30 times since President Obama took office, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack revealed in a recent letter to Congress.

They were among 151 documented meetings and events held since 2004, when the United States and Mexico first started partnering on food-stamp awareness. That partnership, though, has raised alarm with Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., who is concerned the collaboration amounts to a vehicle for the USDA to pressure people onto the food-stamp rolls -- in this case, noncitizen immigrants from Mexico.

Vilsack released the information in response to Sessions' request this summer for more details about the U.S.-Mexico Partnership for Nutrition Assistance initiative, which educates Mexican immigrants about food stamps and other assistance.

The initiative is one of several the agency has "to promote awareness of nutrition assistance among those who need benefits and meet all program requirements under current law," Vilsack told Sessions in the 24-page letter, dated Sept. 12.

However, his letter indicates the number of legal, noncitizens participating in the program -- now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program -- has increased from 425,000 to 1.23 million between 2001 and 2010. And a Republican Budget Committee staffer told The Daily Caller, which first reported the Vilsack letter, the estimated number of legal, noncitizens in the food stamp program is now roughly 1.63 million -- more than double the number who participated in 2008.

Session, the ranking Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, raised concerns in July about the initiative being intended to increase food stamp enrollment among citizens and non-citizens immigrants, and about it perhaps ignoring the "sound principle" of U.S. immigration policy -- that people coming into the United States should not have to rely on U.S. government support.

This summer, the Agriculture Department removed from its website a series of Spanish-language radio ads that featured one character being pressured to go on food stamps. The agency said the public-service announcements were posted roughly four years ago and some of the content failed to meet the standards of "appropriate outreach."

In his letter to Sessions, Vilsack said none of the meetings he described with Mexican officials "were intended to pressure any eligible person to accept benefits" or to increase the number of people enrolled. "Their purpose was to help eligible people in need make informed decisions about whether or not to seek assistance," he wrote.

There have been an estimated 151 activities or meetings between U.S. and Mexican officials related to the initiative since it began in 2004 under the administration on then-President George W. Bush.

Among them were roughly 91 meetings between U.S. and Mexico embassy and consulate staff; 29 health fair events; and 31 roundtable discussions, conferences and forums in 20 cities.

Twenty percent of the meetings and activities occurred since 2008, according to Vilsack's letter.

Those eligible for the program include Mexican Americans, Mexican nationals and migrant communities in the United States.

Vilsack wrote that illegal immigrants are not eligible for food stamps, there is no attempt to bolster the program's rolls and people are not pressured to enroll.

Meanwhile, overall participation in SNAP this summer reached a record high -- 46.7 million people.

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