Latino experts see possibilities, pitfalls in immigration reform effort

By Tina Sfoneles
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Experts from the local Latino community and beyond met Thursday to voice both optimism and caution about the nation’s plans for immigration reform.

“We are at a moment for comprehensive immigration reform unlike anything we’ve seen in recent history,” said Sylvia Puente, executive director of the Latino Policy Forum.

In his State of the Union address on Tuesday night, President Barack Obama said immigration reform is a top priority.

A bipartisan group of eight senators, including Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), is working to fix the immigration system. The record number of Latino voters turned out in November’s election, and Republicans, who lost Hispanic voters, are now taking a serious look at an immigration overhaul.

Still, Puente said there is worry among advocates that a push to reform the nation’s policies might leave out crucial details.

“A concern of my organization is that the compromise of comprehensive immigration reform will be such that it is truly not comprehensive and the compromises that may unfold will be such that many advocates will be incredibly disappointed,” Puente said.

Family reunification and clear path to citizenship for the undocumented are key priorities, she said.

Puente organized a panel of seven experts Thursday morning at Loyola University Chicago to discuss the challenges of immigration reform.

Oscar Chacon, of the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities, wants something done about deportation now.

“There is no reason to wait until Congress takes action in terms of immigration reform,” Chacon said. “We need to address the current humanitarian crisis around the country, in terms of families being torn apart by deportations.”

As the panel convened Thursday morning 1,100 people were being deported, 93 percent to Mexico and others to Central America, Chacon said. And between 33,000 and 36,000 were waking up in detention centers.
“The number of people being detained and the number of people in detention centers are at levels never seen before in history,” Chacon said. “Those people cannot wait until there is a new law.”

Meanwhile, border security continues to spark debate. During the first hearing on immigration reform on Wednesday, Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, met resistance from Republicans who claimed the border was not secure enough now.

New legislation could be introduced as soon as March.