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Students from Staten Island, including a contingent from Wagner College, march past the Dirksen Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, on their way to attend the "Rally for Citizenship."

Quest for the grail of citizenship leads to D.C.

Islanders travel by bus to capital for 50,000-strong rally for sensible reform

By **DEBORAH YOUNG**
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

More than 200 Staten Islanders — students, grandparents, workers bleary-eyed from nightshifts and many native-born Americans among them — converged on Washington, D.C., Wednesday to swell a chorus of more than 50,000 calling for sensible immigration reform.

Dubbed the Rally for Citizenship, the demonstration on the U.S. Capitol's West Lawn included speeches by immigration rights advo-

cates, labor leaders, faith organizations and members of Congress working on immigration legislation.

The time is ripe, advocates said, for thoughtful changes to the country's broken immigration system, and legislation that could benefit individuals, families and the economy at large.

"More and more people, even in public opinion, agree the laws we have don't work. They don't work for immigrants, for the economy. It's not just about the undocumented ... it's to reform a system that's not working for immigrants who have legal status," said Gonzalo Mercado, executive director of El Centro de Hospitalidad in Port Richmond and head of the Staten Island Immigrants Coalition.

Joining him on the bus trip to Washington were students from Wagner College and members of the Staten Island Ghanaian Association, among other activists.

"We are very motivated for people from the Staten Island community and beyond to come together and scream and shout and dance, and that the time is now," said



PHOTO COURTESY OF EL CENTRO DE HOSPITALIDAD

Two buses filled with Staten Islanders traveled to the nation's capital to take part in the "Rally for Citizenship."

Wagner senior Kevin Ferreira, an American citizen who wants all young people who call this country home to have the same access to education he has enjoyed. "It is better for the people and society."

In the hull of the two buses were signs marchers planned to carry, he said, including placards in the shape of a monarch butterfly, a creature known for its movement across North America.

More on the web



For additional photos of Staten Islanders taking

part in the rally, go to silive.com/newspix.

"It is to show migration is natural and beautiful," said Ferreira.

The massive immigration rally comes as a bipartisan Senate group is said to be on the cusp of announcing a proposal to overhaul the nation's immigration system, and a committee hearing could be held on the legislation as early as next week.

The so-called Gang of 8 senators include New York's Charles Schumer, along with John McCain, the Arizona Republican and a longtime leader on immigration reform, as well as possible 2016 GOP presidential candidate Marco Rubio of Florida.

The group members said they are nearing an agreement on the comprehensive proposal that is expected to include a path to citizenship for 11 million illegal immigrants and could serve as a template for a deal between Congress and the White House.

"This is the day we really show and say immigration reform needs to happen this year and it needs to include a path to citizenship. It couldn't come at a better time, when we need a bill to be introduced as soon as possible to move the process forward," said Daniel Coates of the Port Richmond office of Make the Road New York. The organization sent two buses from Staten Island to the rally, among its contingent of 2,000 New Yorkers.

One of the passengers traveling to the rally, ready to shout and chant for reform, was Celso Acevedo of Westerleigh, a Staten Islander for more than 15 years who pays taxes through a tax ID number, has two American-born daughters, yet lives in fear his family could be separated under the current immigration law.

"They need to pass changes so we can work and be members of this country," said Acevedo, who has juggled many jobs to sustain his family. "We contribute. We want to be part of it."