

Pelosi takes a hit as Congress approves border crisis money



House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is urging congressional Democrats to support a bill to help migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. (J. Scott Applewhite / Associated Press)

The House approved a White House- and Senate-supported \$4.5-billion bill Thursday to respond to the humanitarian crisis at the southern border, sending it to President Trump's desk despite deep skepticism from progressives that it doesn't do enough to protect migrant children.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) allowed the bill to come to the floor after days of turmoil that divided rank-and-file House Democrats.

The bill ultimately passed with more Republican votes than Democratic ones, exposing a rare rift in which Pelosi was not able to keep Democrats unified.

The bill was approved 305 to 102. Democrats were split: 129 supported the bill and 95 opposed it.

Pelosi had no option but to bring the Senate bill to the floor when the White House, the Senate and moderate Democrats indicated they would not support making any changes to garner the support of progressives. Among other things, progressives want mandatory care requirements on the facilities housing migrants and safeguards to ensure the funding goes to the border.

In the face of a June 30 funding deadline and next week's congressional recess, Pelosi said that ensuring the funding gets to the border was most important.

"The children come first. At the end of the day, we have to make sure that the resources needed to protect the children are available," Pelosi wrote in a letter to Democratic lawmakers explaining her decision. "In order to get resources to the children fastest, we will reluctantly pass the Senate bill."

Pelosi's decision to accept the Senate bill amounts to an uncommon and potentially embarrassing concession for the speaker.

"It's a blink, not a cave," said a senior Democratic aide, defending her decision.

The bill's passage comes as the conditions of migrants at the border have come into sharp relief nationwide after the release of a photo of a Salvadoran migrant and his 2-year-old daughter who drowned trying to cross the Rio Grande.

Officials at the border said their funding to care for migrants ran out months ago.

Carmen Qualia, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection executive officer in Texas' Rio Grande Valley — the epicenter of the influx of migrant families — said the funding will help them keep temporary holding areas running after they exhausted their \$12.5-million budget in April.

"We are way over budget," Qualia said Thursday during a tour of the agency's largest temporary detention facility, a converted warehouse in McAllen, Texas, holding more than 1,900 people.

"We are not built for that," she said, noting the facility was supposed to house only 1,500 people.

They had 120 staff, but have added 600 to handle the influx of migrant families, Qualia said. At the facility and nine stations across the Rio Grande Valley, Border Patrol was holding 7,600 migrants Thursday, she said. The cost to feed them for a month: \$1.4 million.

That made the stakes on Capitol Hill all the more significant. Lawmakers in both parties were reluctant to leave town for a weeklong holiday recess without approving new funding for the border.

Earlier Thursday, Pelosi proposed a series of tweaks to the Senate bill in order to win over progressive support, but it proved fruitless. The changes would have eliminated funding for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and would have explicitly said where the money needs to go.

But centrist Democrats wanted to quickly approve the Senate bill because it has a sure shot of getting to Trump's desk. They were also concerned that the restrictions on ICE would claw back funding for the agency's work against human

trafficking.

Frustrated progressives split the blame between House Democratic moderates and Senate Democrats.

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) was criticized for not backing Pelosi. House Democrats felt their negotiating power was swiped when the vast majority of Senate Democrats voted for the Senate bill earlier this week.

"I'm looking for a new pharmaceutical drug that builds spine," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.). "Leader Schumer and all the Senate Democrats have to understand that we need them to stand up and oppose cruelty from this administration."

Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Wis.), co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, caustically chided the moderate Democrats in the Problem Solvers Caucus for not supporting Pelosi's changes.

"Since when did the Problem Solvers Caucus become the Child Abuse Caucus?" he wrote in a tweet. "Wouldn't they want to at least fight against contractors who run deplorable facilities? Kids are the only ones who could lose today."

The episode could put to an end what has been several months of progressive and moderate Democrats working in relative alignment in the House under Pelosi.

When asked about Pocan's comment, Rep. Stephanie Murphy (D-Fla.), who leads another centrist Democratic group, the Blue Dog Coalition, grew emotional as she recounted her family's own plight as refugees from Vietnam when she was a baby.

"But for the grace of God, that picture of that father and little girl could have been me," she said. "I am deeply empathetic to the situation at the border. That's why I think it's so important we address it expediently."

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders blamed Democrats for the delay in getting legislation passed.

"They falsely claimed all year that the situation at the border was a 'manufactured crisis' and denied desperately needed humanitarian funding for months," she said in a statement. "The administration sent its request for emergency funding eight weeks ago, but there was no action."

Haberkorn reported from Washington and Hennessy-Fiske from McAllen, Texas. Times staff writer Noah Bierman contributed to this report.

Source:

<https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-congress-humanitarian-border-funding-bill-20190627-story.html>

[Disclaimer]