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9/11 families split on intelligence bill

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Family members of September 11 victims have been among the most prominent advocates for the overhaul of the nation's intelligence community, but they now find themselves working against each other as the House and Senate hammer out final details of a reform bill.

"There is a rift," said Peter Gadiel, president of 9/11 Families for a Secure America.

His group favors the House bill, which includes immigration provisions that have stalled negotiations with the Senate. Key Senate conferees have rejected the immigration and other wide-ranging border-security revisions and say the proposals might prevent the intelligence-overhaul bill from being passed this year.

Mr. Gadiel said a few members of the September 11 Family Steering Committee, the group that lobbied for an independent investigation into the attacks, have endorsed the Senate's version, but they don't represent all of the members of the defunct committee.

Some family members from the steering committee say they want a bill completed this year, and if the immigration provisions or a dispute over the powers of a national intelligence director are delaying passage, the House should yield.

But Mr. Gadiel and the Families for a Secure America say the House's immigration provisions were part of the September 11 commission's report, are central to any reforms and must remain in a final bill.

"You can't have internal security if the borders are open for people to walk across," he said.

Carrie LeMack, a steering committee member and co-founder of the online support group

September 11 Families, said, "In reality, there is no rift. We all want the same thing, and that is for the 9/11 commission recommendations to be implemented."

Mr. Gadiel said certain lawmakers are exploiting family members.

Since the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States issued its report and disbanded, the steering committee has followed suit, but some continue to press Congress for passage this session of the legislation, which is languishing in a bicameral conference.

Both family groups remain nonpartisan, but clearly have split their support between the two chambers.

"Under the guise of making our country safe, the House leadership has pushed for legislation that both diminishes any real power an intelligence director might have and deliberately confuses recommended security improvements with civil liberties infractions," the steering committee says on its Web site.

The message says they "are not — repeat, not — suggesting that immigration reform is not needed — clearly it is. But we are appalled that a minority of politicians would hold the safety of our citizens hostage to legislation that subverts the intent of the original recommendations."

Reps. Christopher Shays, Connecticut Republican, and Carolyn B. Maloney, New York Democrat, were accosted by Families for Secure America members this week. As House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, Illinois Republican, moved to leave the podium at the end of a press conference on Tuesday, a member of the steering committee stopped him to inquire about the progress of the negotiations.

Mr. Gadiel said Mrs. Maloney, Mr. Shays and Sen. John McCain, Arizona Republican, in particular, have convinced members of the steering committee that "the bill would be killed if any border-security measures are allowed in it."

Mr. Shays has said both groups have the right to speak out about the ineffectiveness of Congress. "Every day we fail to pass intelligence reform — a system which desperately needs changes — is a day we continue to put our nation at unnecessary risk," he said.