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Immigration rally invokes Martin Luther King Jr.
'THIS IS THE YEAR' | Calls for reform echo in church where he preached
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With zeal befitting a church where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once preached, Rep. Luis Gutierrez told 1,200 people jammed into First Baptist Congregational Church on the West Side on Saturday that America can no longer put meaningful immigration reform on hold.

Gutierrez -- pushing his own immigration reform bill -- said Latinos didn't turn out in droves to support then-Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama only to see his administration "be the administration that's deported more people than the last administration."

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A crowd of about 1,200 packs the First Baptist Congregational Church, 1612 W. Washington, Saturday to hear immigration and civil rights activists call for reform of U.S. immigration laws.
(Tom Cruze/Sun-Times)

And while Obama has come under fire for trying to tackle too many issues at one time, Gutierrez told the supportive crowd: "This is the year we're going to get it done!"

Saturday's rally, entitled Full Citizenship and Full Employment for Full Equality, featured Chicago area lawmakers as well as union and religious leaders -- all calling for major changes in immigration law. By some estimates, there are 12 million people living illegally in the United States.

Gutierrez says his immigration bill "keeps people working, but understands the needs of our economy. It gives a pathway to citizenship, but understands that immigrants must learn English, pay taxes and contribute to their communities."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson invoked the memory of King -- whose birthday is being commemorated Monday -- in calling for a change in immigration policy.

"His fight was about immigration reform," Jackson said. "It was about one set of rules" for all people.

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And Jackson, like several others who spoke, highlighted the plight of the people of Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake there.

Too often, Jackson said, would-be Haitian immigrants are unfairly turned away from U.S. shores.

"We should play by one set of rules, whether you're from Cuba, Haiti or Mexico," Jackson said.

Gutierrez also took a swipe at his own faith, saying the Roman Catholic Church should stand up for immigration reform the way it fights against abortion.

"My church is a church that should watch every action of unfairness and injustice that has occurred in the Congress of the United States, and not just one or two that they decide to choose," he said.

