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Museums take on immigration debate with exhibits

By SOPHIA TAREEN, Associated Press Writer

CHICAGO - With little progress on Immigration reform among lawmakers, the nationwide debate has entered a new space: museums.

A network of U.S. museums launched a program Wednesday in Chicago that aims to grapple with tough questions on Immigration, including who should have access to health care, how borders should be controlled, and issues of citizenship and identity.

The idea is to get leaders and activists talking to each other in locations connected to history to figure out how to achieve reform, said Liz Sevchenko, director of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

"Part of the reason that there hasn't been a reform bill is that everybody is afraid of opening the debate," she said. "They're afraid of igniting their constituents, so nothing gets done."

But the program, which involves 13 museums, isn't dedicated to crafting specific policies or proposals. Organizers say they'll let the public figure out how they want to talk about issues and museums will tailor events to their local communities in the coming months.

The museums chose Immigration as a focus because it intersects with other topics and historically has been an issue the U.S. struggles with, Sevchenko said.

For instance, the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Mich., which has one of the nation's largest Arab populations, will have classes for college students and an exhibit called "Connecting Communities" in which recent immigrants tell their stories. The Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle has an exhibit called "Deporting Cambodians: How Immigration Policy Shapes Our Communities."

The discussions and displays will not be focused solely on Immigration. For instance, in Chicago, a city with a rich labor history, events at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum will involve labor leaders.

"It's impossible to talk about Immigration without talking about labor or health care," said Lisa Lee, director of the museum dedicated to the writer, social worker and first American woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize. "Before legislation, citizens have to be informed."

Organizers of the program, called "Face to Face: Immigration Then and Now," say it's also important to let the public decide how they want to talk about the issue.

On Wednesday in Chicago, about a dozen activists toured the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum and then talked about how to make social change, drawing largely on personal experience.

Among those invited were hip hop advocates, gay activists and Bill Ayers, a University of Illinois at Chicago professor and 1960s radical whose past association with President Barack Obama created headlines during the campaign.

"Immigration is one of these central issues in American life," Ayers told The Associated Press. "I think the way it is being framed is profoundly dishonest."

While there is no reform bill currently before legislators, Obama has vowed to take up the issue this year. But many Immigration reform activists have been skeptical because details have been scant and other pressing issue, like health care, have been polarizing.

Organizers of the museum program say when it comes to Immigration, they want to circumvent legislators' town hall meetings on health care, which often erupted into shouting matches.

"We hope that we'll be able to prevent what happened with health care to happening with Immigration so people can grapple with the tough questions we're facing," Sevchenko said. "Reform will happen because people are able to look at this issue in a much more informed and measured way."

Other participating museums include the Field Museum and Cambodian American Heritage Museum, both in Chicago; the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte, N.C., the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and Ellis Island in New York; the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles; the New Americans Museum in San Diego; Angel Island in San Francisco; the Tsongas Industrial History Center in Lowell, Mass.; and the University of Texas El Paso's Paso al Norte Immigration History Museum in El Paso, Texas.

The museums are part of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a network which has more than 200 members worldwide.

On the Web:

International Coalition of Sites of Conscience: www.sitesofconscience.org/en

Jane Addams Hull-House Museum: www.uic.edu/jaddams/hull