

GANNETT

Bringing undocumented immigrants out of the shadows

Millions of undocumented - including 259,000 in the Inland Empire - cheer a legalization plan moving through Congress, but critics of the effort fear that it will spur a new wave of illegal entries

By: Tatiana Sanchez – June 2, 2013

One hundred walked into a small, dimly lit room on First Street, many wearing nursing scrubs or muddied T-shirts from a long work day.

Some carried babies and held them on their laps as they squeezed into rows of rickety folding chairs at Centro Martin Ortiz in Coachella.

There was a bright yellow banner at the front of the room: “If my taxes are legal, why do they call me illegal?”

Unsure what to expect, a few giggled. A baby cried and a man at the front could be heard above the noise, talking in Spanish.

Mario Lazcano is the voice of Comité Latino, a group fighting for immigration reform. He asked the crowd, mostly from homes in the eastern Coachella Valley, to rally as Congress debated the predicament of millions like them.

On a hot night in March, the crowd talked about the secret they share only with family and close friends, about the day they set foot in the United States.

After months of negotiations in Congress, significant immigration reform had emerged in the Senate for the first time since President George W. Bush urged the nation to create a path to citizenship and, in the bargain, tighten border security.

Congress rejected Bush’s plan and Republicans effectively stalled the next president’s efforts until Latino voters overwhelmingly supported Democrats in November, breaking 71 percent for President Barack Obama.

Immigration reform is moving in bipartisan hands now. If passed, the impact will be especially acute in Southern California, where the 130-mile border with Mexico is a barrier and a connection to family, history and hope.

The Mexicali-to-Calexico crossing leads to acres of farmland in Imperial and Riverside counties along the same highway that bisects the resort communities of Indian Wells, Rancho Mirage and Palm Springs.

Immigrant laborers who traverse the border, legally and illegally, are integral to the success of the region's agricultural industry, with crops worth more than \$500 million a year. At spas, golf clubs and hotels, immigrants cultivate and trim palms and bougainvillea, dust courtyards and turn down beds for tourists who spend more than \$4 billion a year in the desert.

Increasingly, the region's politics are defined by the children and grandchildren of farm laborers or of the families granted amnesty in 1986 by President Ronald Reagan.

The new generation of immigrants —dreamers —are bound by a narrative created since the 2001 terrorist attacks and the bombings at the Boston Marathon. Securing our borders and scrutinizing who gets a visa today carries the urgency of preventing another attack.

As President Obama urges the nation to back his vision of reform, eight senators, Republicans and Democrats, have introduced an immigration overhaul package that measures 844 pages.

The bill outlines a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and appropriates billions in new funding for border security. It would crack down on businesses that hire undocumented workers, increase the number of guest worker visas and improve employment verification.

In short, it would change nearly everything for the people who, after a long day of work, came to hear Lazcano in a stuffy church room. Sleep would wait.

Here to stay

California is home to one of every four U.S. immigrants.

And within California, one of the highest concentrations of undocumented immigrants — an estimated 259,000 people —is in the Inland Empire, according to a report released in May by the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California.

Among the report's findings:

- One in seven Inland Empire children has at least one undocumented parent.
- One in three heads of undocumented immigrant households owns their home, higher than the state average of 17 percent
- The average undocumented immigrant in the Inland Empire immigrated to the United States at 19 and has lived here a decade or more.

“All of this speaks to a population that is here to stay, as are their children,” according to authors Manuel Pastor, the center's director, and Enrico A. Marcelli, an associate professor at San Diego State University. “We suggest that California should begin planning for what comes the day after immigration reform —immigrant integration.”

The cost of integration is one of the most-disputed aspects of the current debate over immigration reform.

Nationally, there are an estimated 11.1 million undocumented immigrants, with nearly a quarter, 2.6 million, in California. That's about twice the population of San Diego.

According to Pastor and Marcelli, granting citizenship would generate at least \$4.5 billion a year for the California economy.

U.S. Social Security Chief Actuary Stephen Goss said the proposed immigration overhaul would add 3.2 million jobs nationwide, increase gross domestic product by 1.63 percent and boost the Social Security trust fund over the next decade, according to a letter he sent to Republican Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, a member of the "Gang of Eight" working on reform in the Senate.

In early May, a Heritage Foundation report heralded by Heritage President Jim DeMint, a former Republican senator from South Carolina, estimated the cost of immigration reform at \$6.3 trillion over 50 years, factoring in entitlements such as Social Security and Medicare.

Republicans and Democrats argued the Heritage report undercounted economic contributions from newly legalized residents. When previous research by the study's co-author, Jason Richwine, emerged suggesting Latino IQs may be too low to assimilate, the Heritage study was sidelined.

Libertarian scholars at the Cato Institute have predicted a net-positive impact if undocumented residents given legal status more fully participate in the economy.

A study published last week and led by researchers at Harvard Medical School found that from 2002 to 2009, immigrants paid \$115 billion more into Medicare for hospital services than what they received in return.

Whether or not immigrants are an economic drain or a boost, most Americans support immigration reform. The latest national survey by the Pew Research Center, conducted in early May, found:

- 75 percent say the country's immigration system needs a major overhaul.
- 73 percent believe there should be a way for illegal immigrants already in the United States who meet certain requirements to stay here.
- 56 percent do not feel that giving people who are illegally in the United States a way to gain legal status would be rewarding them for doing something wrong.

Eager to contribute

At a Starbucks on Date Palm Drive in Cathedral City, Miguel described his life in Morelia, the capital city of Michoacán, a state in central Mexico under siege by drug cartels.

In 2008, a hand grenade attack killed eight people in Morelia and injured more than 100 others. That same year, thugs threatened to kidnap and then ransom Miguel and his wife.

On legal travel visas, the couple escaped to the United States. When those visas expired, Miguel, a psychologist in Mexico who didn't want his last name used, started working as a janitor at a restaurant. Today, he is a room service attendant at a hotel in the Coachella Valley.

"You start to lose your identity," Miguel said. "But working in a hotel is a job, and all jobs are dignified. You learn to adapt one way or another."

In the United States, Miguel's wife gave birth to a son. On his way to a play date, Miguel, dressed in khakis and a short-sleeve dress shirt, stopped to drink a Frappuccino.

His family's immigration story is similar to those of hundreds of thousands of others who fled bloodshed and ethnic strife in El Salvador and Guatemala or poverty and drug violence in Mexico.

"I have all of this experience from my country ...it has to be good for something," Miguel said. "We haven't had any traffic tickets. We have nothing on our record. We've come here to contribute."

But without legal documents, Miguel and his wife are members of a vibrant American sub-culture: undocumented resident parents of an infant U.S. citizen.

Irma Herrera of New America Media, a California-based network for ethnic media, said legal status is top of mind for many in the eastern Coachella Valley.

"What people are really frightened of is being stopped and finding themselves lost in the deportation machinery," she said, "even when it comes to people who have been here many years and are well-integrated into the community."

Violeta, a farmworker who lives in a trailer near the Salton Sea, didn't want her last name printed for fear she would attract scrutiny from the Border Patrol. Originally from Michoacán, Violeta has been waiting 19 years for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service to grant her legal residency.

"It's an extremely slow process," Violeta said. "It almost seems like a joke to us immigrants."

Violeta's mother, Margarita, waited more than 10 years for legal residency. Her documentation arrived shortly before she died of cancer in December.

"If there is no reform," Violeta said, "people will die before they see their papers."

Smuggling hot spot

At the Border Patrol checkpoint along Highway 86 in El Centro, it's business as usual on a gloomy Thursday morning.

A short line of cars and commercial trucks slows down as drivers roll down their windows to approach a "primary officer." A second border agent reads the license plate on each car.

If the officer has more questions or asks for ID, the drivers stop, but most just pause and then pull away after an agent nods or waves.

The rumble of engines is the only ambient sound here in the El Centro Sector, a swath of harsh desert terrain and lush irrigated fields stretching 70 linear miles from the Jacumba Mountains to the Imperial Sand Dunes. The sector encompasses all of Imperial County and parts of Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego counties.

In a nearby portable office, which serves as the checkpoint station, four small holding cells line a wall. The cells are empty today, but they can hold up to 18 detainees.

Selected Border Patrol agents are temporarily assigned to the Indio Police Station as a part of a Border Community Liaison Program responsible for community outreach. Agents coordinate career fairs and meet with youth groups, among other activities.

The Indio Border Patrol station primarily handles daily operations at the Highway 86 checkpoint, a hot spot for human and narcotic smugglers, Supervisory Border Patrol Agent Armando Garcia said.

On May 11, an 18-year-old man was arrested with 4½ pounds of heroin, worth \$144,000 on the street, strapped to his belt. The man, a U.S. permanent resident, was a passenger on a tour bus.

Crime and security along the border are significant problems. From Oct. 1, 2011, through Sept. 30, 2012, El Centro-based agents apprehended 23,916 people, nearly 22,000 of them with marijuana and cocaine. Just 923 were U.S. citizens.

In March, El Centro tallied 2,098 apprehensions for people who attempted to come into the country illegally. Though most of them are eventually deported back to their home countries, each apprehension is unique, Garcia said.

In April, the sector carried out 1,971 apprehensions. They apprehended more than 1,384 people in May.

Indio Police Chief Richard Twiss and his officers have spent years forging relationships with the immigrant community.

“Pretty simply, from my standpoint, I want people to feel comfortable reporting crimes,” he said. “If they’re the victim of a crime, or if they see something occurring, I want them to feel comfortable reporting that to the police department, without fear of what their status is.”

After Twiss became chief last year, Indio’s police and council opted out of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Operation Stonegarden, a program that sends federal money to state, local and tribal police if they assign officers to border security.

In fiscal year 2009, more than 84 percent of \$90 million appropriated for Stonegarden went to Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas. About \$19 million went to California.

But the program “wasn’t a good fit” for Indio, despite the extra funding, Twiss said.

Angered by the U.S. government's inability to prevent illegal crossings, some Californians are self-deputizing.

Jeff Schwilk of San Diegans for Secure Borders has visited the border south of San Diego 25 times in eight years. He camps in an RV lot and patrols the dusty roads and fields north of Tijuana.

"If you legalize 11 million undocumented immigrants first, you're going to get another 11 million illegally coming in," Schwilk said.

When he spots someone jumping into the United States, he calls the Border Patrol from his cell phone.

"The Obama administration has been telling us that people won't come across ... That's just a big lie," Schwilk said. "Anybody comes in."

Letting them work

For the Coachella Valley, a large undocumented population picks juicy grapes and plump dates, scrubs restaurant floors and makes hotel beds.

At least half of the region's farmworkers are undocumented. Three-quarters of all farmworkers make less than \$15,000 a year, according to the Riverside County Coachella Valley Farm Worker Survey project of 2006.

Farmers throughout the country have felt the sting of a shrinking workforce due to tighter border security and an aging farmworker population. It will worsen as the season wears on, according to the California Farm Bureau Federation. The bureau, like most farming organizations, supports comprehensive immigration reform.

The proposed immigration reform bill includes a new guest-worker program.

The program would allow low-skilled, foreign laborers to legally work in the U.S. beginning in 2015. The program would administer 20,000 visas in its first year and rise to 75,000 by the fourth year. The visa would last three years but could be renewed for additional three-year periods.

Legalizing the thousands of undocumented workers who cultivate the valley's crops would secure a workforce for farmers, increase pay rates and smooth the production of American-grown food, said Albert Keck, owner of Hadley Date Gardens in Thermal.

"I think it's a shame that we don't have a functional system in place in our country today for people who are willing to work," said Keck, whose mother is from Mexico.

"There seems to be a misconception that immigrants take away employment," he said. "I think they actually help us expand our economy and create more employment."

"We owe it to them and to ourselves to have a functional system that allows them the dignity —and the protection —of being in this country legitimately."

Dick Oliphant, president of the Lincoln Club of the Coachella Valley, a Republican organization with 150 members, said the country's immigration system is a "gigantic problem."

Though he feels border security should be addressed first, Oliphant said undocumented immigrants here to work should be granted a form of residency.

"For the most part, the people who are here illegally are working in jobs where most Americans don't want to work," he said. "I'm thinking about agriculture and hospitality, that sort of thing. And because they are people without any kind of standing in this country, they have no way of getting promoted."

Sending a message

For spring in Coachella, it was unusually hot and organizers passed out umbrellas and sunscreen for protection as they marched from a parking lot in a mostly empty shopping center down Harrison Street for two miles.

More than 200 carried "Sí se puede" posters above their heads and waved blood-red flags, both trademarks of the immigration call for reform.

Two months later, Comité Latino rallied 50 at Frances Stevens Park in Palm Springs. Days later, a priest from Mexico made a Coachella stop in his nationwide journey, as part of "La Caravana de la Esperanza" or "The Caravan of Hope" to build solidarity between the borders.

Quieter, but no less critical to families in the east valley, were community meetings promoted by word-of-mouth to relay updates from Congress, information that doesn't often reach immigrants in the fields and isolated trailer parks.

"We're in a really critical time," said Arturo Rodriguez, president of United Farm Workers of America, who marched alongside reformers in Coachella and is based near UFW headquarters in Keene, Calif. "We have to show Obama the activism and the interest that exists among us. We have to talk to our family members about immigration reform."

Comité Latino's marches and rallies have attracted local politicians, such as Rep. Raul Ruiz, Assemblyman V. Manuel Pérez and Coachella Mayor Eduardo Garcia. The three are the children of farmworkers and immigrants. All three support a path to citizenship.

Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit, who will face Pérez next year in the race for supervisor, and Assemblyman Brian Nestande, who will challenge Ruiz, support an expanded guest-worker program and tighter border security.

In February, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution with a 5-0 vote in support of immigration reform. No city council in the valley, however, has taken a public stance on the issue.

The Riverside County vote was a small victory for immigration activists such as Armando Navarro, a political scientist and professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside.

Navarro helped organize the meeting in March at Centro Martin Ortiz. Inside the center, he told the crowd that critics of reform “are afraid of Mexicans because we are becoming the majority.”

By next year, Latinos will outnumber whites in California, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In the Inland Empire, 82 percent of undocumented immigrants are from Mexico.

Listening to Navarro was Guadalupe Mundo, 52. A social worker in Mexico, today she is a housekeeper and lives in Coachella.

“We have to get organized and act,” she said. “We have to fight for more humane immigration laws that apply to a larger number of people.”

Two hours later, the meeting ended and the families returned to their homes in the dark. Work would begin at dawn, before the worst of the heat.

As people left the room, Navarro felt a new energy.

“I saw democracy at work,” he said. “I saw and felt a sense of spirit, a sense of hope,” he said. “That says something about the contagion that’s emerging right now.”

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