

Migration Workers Making Plans to Respond to Government Raids

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- While it's probably not imminent, Helen Vasquez and the staff at the Guadalupe Center in Huntingburg, Ind., are getting ready for an immigration raid.

With 10,000 Hispanic immigrants in the counties of Dubois, Spencer and Daviess in the Diocese of Evansville, Ind., Vasquez expects that the factories and farms where many of them work are in the cross hairs of federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.

Vasquez is well aware of the turmoil that families and communities from Massachusetts to California have experienced in the aftermath of recent ICE raids. She's thankful that southwest Indiana has not been targeted yet. But she expects it's only a matter of time before ICE makes its move.

"The potential for a raid is very big," she told Catholic News Service July 29 during the 2008 National Migration Conference in Washington. "So it's very important to us to be prepared."

Vasquez, a retired federal employee who now works as a consultant in family-based immigration, has been among a small contingent of faith-based workers in the area three hours south of Indianapolis who have spent the last year developing a raid-response plan.

Much of their effort has focused on educating members of the largely Salvadoran immigrant population about their constitutional rights, identifying attorneys to handle cases and lining up the necessary paperwork to protect the families and property of undocumented immigrants.

Even though there has been no large-scale raid, anxiety is pervasive among the immigrants Vasquez knows. She said immigrants also have come to distrust local police, who often stop Hispanics to check their immigration status and make arrests for minor traffic violations. In many cases, the arrest is the first step toward deportation, she explained.

Vasquez was on hand for a July 29 workshop led by lawyers from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, known as CLINIC, during the migration conference. She wanted to pick up a few pointers as well as share what she has learned with others from across the U.S. who are just starting to write their own raid-response plans.

"Raids are pervasive," Karen Herrling, a staff attorney with CLINIC in Washington, told workshop participants. "They're happening every day in our communities."

Herrling said more raids can be expected, especially as ICE builds its force of fugitive operations teams pursuing undocumented immigrants from 75 teams to 104 by the end of September.

Noting what Herrling called an "explosion" in workplace raids, Ryan Dwyer, policy adviser for Migration and Refugee Services, said the bishops have questioned the effectiveness of such massive actions.

"The bishops' position at this point on raids is that while enforcement of employment eligibility needs to be done we don't believe raids are the most effective or humane way of going about it," he said.

Dwyer outlined a plan seeking broader collaboration with law enforcement officials to minimize the negative impact on families, particularly children, when enforcing

immigration laws. He called for alternatives to detention for immigrants who are no threat to society or are not a flight risk, a slowing of court proceedings to allow immigrants to secure appropriate legal representation, and more adequate clergy access to those immigrants being detained.

The same concerns were spelled out in a March 24 letter to Julie Myers, assistant secretary for ICE in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, from Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration. The letter followed a meeting between Myers and committee members.

Bishop Wester also urged Myers to end the commingling of children from immigrant families whose parents are incarcerated on immigration charges with juveniles being held on criminal charges.

The workshop focused on practical aspects of developing a plan, from basic education to media relations. Herrling outlined CLINIC's model which she offered as the basis for any statewide or regional raid-response plan. The plan includes five response teams: community education and outreach to immigrants, community liaison to key leaders, legal services, social services and media relations.

Susan Schreiber, senior attorney for CLINIC in Chicago and part of a team drafting a raid-response plan in Illinois, reminded the gathering of the importance of involving people from the grass roots so that the needs of immigrants are fully addressed.

"This is a process that involves partners and a buy-in of the participants," Schreiber said.

Schreiber described an ongoing effort in Illinois that encompasses the identification of volunteers to help the families of someone taken into custody during a raid to lining up safe gathering places for immigrants who may be concerned they will be targeted next for detention.

She also suggested developing a relationship with ICE officials ahead of any potential raid so that if questions arise regarding questionable actions by agents they can be addressed quickly.

"Every community may or may not experience an enforcement action, but every community wants to think about how do I do outreach to my community, how to do safe planning in my community, how to identify places for people to gather in the event of an enforcement action," Schreiber said.

"Keep in mind this is a lot of work," she added. "I think everybody is motivated ... but it's definitely a big challenge to realize how much work is involved."