
DailyRecord.com

April 28, 2008

Christie tells Dover: Being undocumented 'not a crime'

In talk on range of topics, says it's an administrative issue

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Daily Record*

DOVER -- Preventing gang violence in New Jersey, fighting terrorism and cracking down on state corruption were key issues that U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie touched upon in a two-hour forum at the United Methodist Church on Sunday afternoon.

Fostering relations among the local Latino community and discussing immigration reform, however, were the basis for the event, sponsored by the church and the Morris County chapter of the Latino Leadership Alliance of New Jersey.

At the request of Mayor James Dodd, Christie, a Mendham Township resident, addressed the hot-button topic of illegal immigration during a question-and-answer session by the audience of approximately 70 people.

Flanked by LLANJ President Martin Perez and Edward Correa, LLANJ's director of community initiatives, Christie offered a response to critics who have questioned why the U.S. Attorney's Office has not done more to combat the problem.

"Being in this country without proper documentation is not a crime," said Christie. He noted that the issue is an administrative matter for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

"The whole phrase of 'illegal immigrant' connotes that the person by just being here committed a crime ... We're not going to be arresting people who are here undocumented."

But the 45-year-old Christie, who is rumored for a possible gubernatorial run next year, admitted that his hands are tied in enforcing laws that penalize illegal immigrants.

Re-entry after deportation is a crime, but the U.S. Attorney's Office cannot prosecute illegal immigrants unless more stringent measures are passed, he said.

"What I'm dealt with is a group of laws that are patchwork at the moment, and we do our best to enforce them," Christie said. "Let's make sure when we use the word 'illegal' that we make a distinction between civil laws and criminal laws."

The Rev. Daniel Martinez said Christie's appearance at the East Blackwell Street church will help create an ongoing dialogue with the Latino community and help raise awareness among its residents of the law enforcement perspective.

"He's made important points to us in regard to immigration and undocumented people," said Martinez, whose church also serves as a center for immigrants.

Martinez noted that Christie has been openly critical of actions taken by Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello, who unsuccessfully sought to impose 287G, a federal immigration program to deputize

Morristown's police officers as immigration agents.

Last summer, Christie accused Cresitello of "grandstanding" during a rally for immigration reform after the mayor resorted to name-calling in response to the rally's opponents. He recalled the incident during his remarks on Sunday.

"I don't think it's helpful when a mayor of a town in New Jersey stands up at a rally and calls people he believes to be undocumented 'pinkos' and communists," said Christie to a loud round of applause.

"The worst thing we can do is demagogue the issue and make it worse."

Many residents who took their turns at the microphone following Christie's comments commended him for his work within the past 6 1/2 years and asked specific questions about the topics at hand.

But only one -- Sussex County resident Greg Marholak -- asked about the rumors that Christie, a Republican, will try to succeed Gov. Jon S. Corzine next year.

Christie responded by saying he has yet to make a decision on his future, but will address it following the end of the Bush administration.

"Once (President Bush) is out, I'll be unemployed and looking for a job," he joked.

Some local residents who didn't attend the forum, however, felt Christie's presentation in Dover would only serve to benefit him with the Latino vote if he does choose to run for governor.

"I don't understand why Chris Christie, as a U.S. attorney, is visiting a sanctuary for illegal aliens," said longtime Dover resident Joan Tambini, prior to the event. "It's actually a violation of his oath to uphold the law to assist lawbreakers."

But Maureen and Ralph Castriotta of Roxbury said they were inspired to hear Christie speak.

"I have high regard for Chris Christie as a fighter of corruption," said Maureen Castriotta, a Roxbury school board member.

Her husband agreed.

"He's the only one who seems to come out and tell the truth," Ralph Castriotta said. "It's refreshing."
