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Immigration advocates: Know your rights

How reform could change rules focus of Dover forum

BY ROB JENNINGS
DAILY RECORD

DOVER -- Everyone entering First United Methodist Church on Sunday night was handed a pocket-sized card entitled, "What to do if the police, immigration or other authorities stop you."

The 6 p.m. forum was aimed at providing immigrants, including those in the U.S. illegally, with an overview of their legal rights and a perspective on how things might change under reform legislation backed by President Bush.

"At this moment, the immigration system is under revision. We're being part of the conversation," said Elissa Steglich, managing attorney at the American Friends Service Committee's Immigrant Rights Program in Newark.

Sunday's forum was organized in part by Morristown-based Wind of the Spirit, an immigrant advocacy group. It was conducted almost entirely in Spanish. Headphones providing translations in English were offered to some in the audience, including the Daily Record.

In addition to Steglich, speakers included a Drew University professor who drew a pro-immigrant analogy from Biblical teaching and a representative from the National Latino Peace Officer Association.

General accusations of police harassment against immigrants drew loud applause from the audience.

"How many times have we experienced Latin men and women leaving a half-hour early for class because they know they're going to be pulled over by state police," Otto Maduro, a Drew professor of World Christianity, said according to the translation.

Maduro, without providing specifics, also alluded to "policemen that will come home at 4, 5 in the morning ... they will break windows. They will arrest everyone."

Ray Sanchez, speaking from the audience, claimed that Dover police were hassling immigrants standing in groups of four.

"Nobody has a right to tell you to move just because you're standing on the corner," he said.

Dover police declined comment on the forum.

Those who did not want to speak publicly Sunday night filled out a form. Their messages were passed to Maduro and the other two speakers.

The first question was whether the reform bill would allow someone who entered the U.S. illegally to obtain legal residency without first having to leave.

Steglich laid out various scenarios under the proposed legislation but noted there is no way to be certain about anything at this point.

"We don't know how it's going to impact if you've been in the United States, been deported and came back. We do not know how it will apply to people without stable jobs," she said.

The immigration debate has been drawing substantial attention in Morris County -- particularly in Morristown, where Mayor Donald Cresitello wants to deputize local police to enforce immigration laws.

Dover, as well, has been the focus of controversy over a heavy presence of day laborers and other issues stemming from both legal and illegal immigration.

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Sunday's forum, though, mostly stuck to providing information and an overview of what immigrants should know about the nation's laws.

"It's part of the Constitution to respect all human rights, even though they're violated from time to time,"Steglich said.

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