



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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CATHOLIC CONFERENCE BACKS DRIVERS LICENSES FOR UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Arguing that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants make a positive contribution to the community, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference urged the legislature not to approve a law that would prohibit the issuance of drivers' licenses to undocumented immigrants and refugees.

Currently, Wisconsin is one of about 10 states that permit undocumented immigrants to obtain a state driver's license. Those who want to change the law argue that denying drivers licenses to those who cannot prove legal residence will aid in the war against terrorism.

"This issue involves a balancing test," testified WCC Executive Director John Huebscher. "On one side, is the right of all people to migrate. When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive."

"On the other side is the fact that, while people have a right to migrate, so do sovereign nations have a right to control their territories. But this right is conditioned. As the bishops of the US and Mexico said in the joint statement on migration, *Strangers No Longer*, 'More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.'"

"So while immigration policy must necessarily balance a variety of goods, from a moral point of view the key concern for the Church is how best to advance and defend the human dignity of migrants," Huebscher noted.

The WCC testimony recounted the Church's long experience helping immigrants assimilate into American society. Huebscher reported that the office of Migration & Refugee Services (MRS) of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops resettles nearly a quarter of all refugees admitted to the United States. Here in Wisconsin, the Department of Workforce Development recently asked Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and the Dioceses of Madison, Green Bay and La Crosse to help in the resettlement of about 3500 Hmong refugees. Catholic Charities and Catholic parishes all over the state regularly work with Hispanic immigrants—the largest single group of immigrants to our state.

“As we have helped settle documented immigrants, we have ministered to many who are undocumented,” he added. “Catholics also worship with undocumented immigrants in our parishes. We baptize their children and teach their children in our schools. We feed them in our meal programs and house them in our shelters, care for them in our hospitals, counsel them, grieve with them, and help them bury their dead.”

“When we look into the face of a human being we don’t ask ‘Are you legal?’ We ask, ‘How can we help?’” he added.

Huebscher argued that it is not helpful to equate an undocumented immigrant with a terrorist. He argued that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants in our nation are hardworking individuals who improve their lives – and ours – by doing the work that many native-born citizens are either unwilling or unable to do.

“Al Qu’ida is an international network with access to large amounts of money, technology and other resources. A terrorist backed by such a network will easily obtain a fake driver’s license,” Huebscher suggested. “On the other hand, denying a driver’s license to undocumented persons will make it harder for them to hold a job and connect to the community. It may also lead to deportation, a move that would disrupt families.”

“Given that the bill will do little to deter terrorists while doing harm to nonviolent people, the committee should decline to take further action on this bill and maintain current law”, Huebscher concluded.

Nearly two dozen speakers, most of them from Wisconsin’s Latino community, spoke in opposition to the bill. The committee took no action on the bill following the hearing.