



IMMIGRATION: WELCOMING THE STRANGER AMONG US

INTRODUCTION

One of the major problems facing Wisconsin's economy is the low growth rate of the population. In part this is the result of an aging population and a lower birth rate relative to other states. In part it is the result of low migration to our state. Only 4.2% of Wisconsin residents are foreign born, compared with the national average of 11.9%. In this new global economy, therefore, how we respond to immigrants, will not only be a test of our compassion and respect for human dignity, but it may very well determine our state's economic future.

IMMIGRATION FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

As the U.S. Catholic Bishops stated in their 2000 statement, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, "Without condoning undocumented migration, the Church supports the human rights of all people and offers them pastoral care, education, and social services, no matter what the circumstances of entry into this country, and it works for the respect of the human dignity of all—especially those who find themselves in desperate circumstances. We recognize that nations have the right to control their borders. We also recognize and strongly assert that all human persons, created as they are in the image of God, possess a fundamental dignity that gives rise to a more compelling claim to the conditions worthy of human life. Accordingly, the Church also advocates legalization opportunities for the maximum number of undocumented persons, particularly those who have built equities and otherwise contributed to their communities."

Catholic social teaching holds that, like the right to property, the right to migrate is not unlimited. It may be restricted when other, higher rights are endangered. If the security of a nation is threatened or if the nation does not have sufficient resources to sustain its own inhabitants, it is lawful to halt the flow of immigrants. Such, however, is not the case in the United States, where the vast majority of immigrants are not a threat to our security, but rather are hardworking individuals who improve their lives and those of their new homeland while performing the work that native-born citizens are either unwilling or unable to perform.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

Several specific proposals would have a direct impact on the lives of immigrants in our state:

In-state Tuition for Undocumented Immigrants. The WCC supports a proposal that would allow undocumented immigrants to pay resident tuition at any of the UW schools. In essence, the WCC believes that an intelligent, motivated student without legal papers should have the same opportunity to attend a university as an American citizen or resident alien who moved to Wisconsin from a neighboring state. At a time when attracting a diverse and educated population is critical to the economic future of our state, our university should be given every opportunity to enroll our best and brightest minority students.

Some will argue that granting in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants simply rewards illegal behavior. Justice, however, holds that because the children of undocumented immigrants are in this country through no fault of their own, they should not be punished for any illegal actions their parents took. Because of this we do not deny these children access to a K-12 education in our schools. By extension, if undocumented youth complete high school and take the steps necessary to gain admission to a UW school, it is only just that they

should be charged the same tuition as their in-state peers. After all, in-state tuition exists for those who pay state taxes, something that all residents do—whether they are legal or illegal residents.

The WCC also supports this proposal for the pragmatic reason that a more educated and diverse population benefits everyone. Poorly educated immigrants are already vital to the economic prosperity of our state, not only because they willingly perform many necessary jobs in the agricultural and service sectors, but also because they create demand for a whole range of goods and services—many of which translate to more jobs for our state. All the more so, will more educated immigrants from our state universities enrich our community with their culture, expertise and entrepreneurship. Not to mention the assistance they give their fellow immigrants in navigating and acculturating to American ways.

Driver's Licenses for Undocumented Immigrants. The WCC opposes Assembly Bill 69, which would limit driver's licenses to individuals who can prove they are legal residents. Although some argue that the bill is necessary to counter the threat posed by terrorists who have used this form of identification in the past, others argue that such a bill will create more problems than it solves. Unlicensed drivers are more likely to cause accidents because they will not undergo driver's tests. They will also be more difficult to find in case of accidents. An additional concern is the increased chance of racial profiling, as government clerks and others attempt to determine which foreign-born clients are or are not legal. Driver's licenses exist for the purpose of ensuring safe driving. They should not be used to enforce the federal government's responsibility for immigration.

Prenatal Care for Undocumented Immigrant Women. Under current law, many low-income pregnant women receive care through the state's Medical Assistance program. However low-income, undocumented immigrant women are currently only eligible to receive prenatal care once they reach their seventh month of pregnancy. This emergency medical coverage leaves the mother and the child exposed to an increased risk of negative birth outcomes.

The Department of Health and Family Services has proposed to expand BadgerCare to cover prenatal care for non-qualified (i.e. undocumented), pregnant immigrant women. Federal regulations under the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) allow states the option to cover the fetus of a pregnant woman at an enhanced federal reimbursement rate. This proposal will expand prenatal care services to women who are not eligible for full Medical Assistance (Medicaid) services, but whose children, once born, would be eligible for BadgerCare benefits.

The WCC supports this proposal on moral and pragmatic grounds. It reflects the fact that a human life is present from conception and it offers the kind of preventive care that is so critical if future health problems are to be avoided.

ACTION REQUESTED

Urge legislators to:

- support in-state tuition for undocumented residents;
- oppose efforts to deny driving licenses to undocumented residents;
- support prenatal care for undocumented immigrant women.

For more information, please contact Barbara Sella at 608/257-0004.