


Group: Reform immigration

TEXT SIZE 
By: DAVID LEVINSKY
Burlington County Times

RIVERSIDE - A group of 20 township residents sat close together around a pair of cellular phones Wednesday night and listened quietly as national activists spoke on conference call about their plans to get a national immigration reform bill passed next year.

Two similar gatherings were held in Willingboro and Cinnaminson and were part of the nationwide call for reform organized by the group Immigration for America.

"Every 30 to 40 years, America, through its greatness, brings about massive change and we are in a similar perfect storm now," said Charles "Shal" Goldstein, executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, about the need for comprehensive reform.

Goldstein, who attended the Riverside house party, said the issue was both a moral and economic one because of the labor that immigrants provide to small businesses.

He pointed to Riverside as a "national example" because of the small stores and businesses that have closed there in the three years since the local governing body passed a law penalizing businesses and landlords that hired or rented to illegal immigrants.

The 2006 law never was enforced and was repealed the next year after a federal judge struck down a similar law in Hazleton, Pa., but Goldstein and other activists said it scared away a large portion of Riverside's thriving population of Brazilians and Portuguese.

The Rev. Angelo Amaral of Jesus the Good Shepherd Catholic Parish on Middleton Street said many of the immigrants who remained in Riverside still face discrimination and racism.

"It's very strange. They've experienced a lot of hate, some from very young people. It's very sad because these are good people," Amaral said at the house party.

One township resident who attended the party said she once was living here illegally but has obtained a student visa. She said she hopes immigration reform is approved so she can continue to live in the United States.

"I like this place and know everybody here," said the woman, who asked not to be identified. "I hope to stay."

Goldstein said most of the 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States are not criminals, but are hardworking students or residents who have overstayed their visas.

He said the proposed reforms would provide a method for such undocumented workers to become citizens after paying fines, taxes and certain fees and would allow deported immigrants with family living in the United States to return here.

U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez of Illinois said during the conference call that he planned to introduce reform legislation in Congress next month.

"Every single day in America, families are being divided," Gutierrez said. "It's a crisis for human and civil rights, and we can no longer afford to wait."

Other activists participating in the conference call urged those listening to pressure their congressmen and President Barack Obama to support Gutierrez's proposed bill.

They noted that U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano and senior White House adviser David Axelrod have said the White House would push for comprehensive immigration reform in 2010.

Goldstein said he hoped Burlington County residents would lobby Congressmen Chris Smith, R-4th of Robbinsville, and John Adler, D-3rd of Cherry Hill, to support that effort. Both legislators represent districts that cover large parts of the county.

"Immigration reform likely will determine the human rights legacy of Congressman Chris Smith and also will chart the course for the future of Congressman Adler," Goldstein said.

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