

The Catholic Church should expect immigrants will need help with legalization process

WASHINGTON (CNS) — First there's the hurdle of Congress passing an immigration bill. But the church should already be planning how to help millions of people who could line up to legalize their immigration status under a hypothetical new law, speakers at an April 18 conference said.

"When legalization happens, immigrants are going to come to the institution they trust the most, the Catholic Church," said Mirna Torres, director of legalization and advocacy for the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., known as CLINIC.

She spoke at a background briefing and lobbying conference of the Justice for Immigrants program, the U.S. Catholic Church's immigration outreach and education project.

Along with enforcement mechanisms, changes in family immigration procedures and temporary worker programs, one of the key components of comprehensive immigration reform proposals is a system by which people who are already in the United States illegally can become legal U.S. residents and eventually apply for citizenship.

The Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act, or STRIVE Act, known as H.R. 1645, is the principal piece of immigration legislation introduced so far this term.

It would open the legalization process to people who have worked in the United States for six years, and they would have to pay a fine and any back taxes owed, pass English and civics tests, and follow a "touchback" process, involving a brief return to their home countries.

If even half of the estimated 12 million immigrants currently in the United States illegally are eligible for legalization, the number would be double the nearly 3 million who were legalized under a 1986 law.

Torres said it's likely that there will be a rather short time limit for applying, meaning legal and social service agencies that will help process applications for the government could have thousands of people lining up as soon as a law is enacted.

In addition to assistance with filling out and filing government forms, those immigrants will need help learning English, establishing their identity and gathering documents that show how long they have lived and worked in the United States, Torres said.

For many people, simply proving their physical presence in the United States for the required period of time will be difficult because they have consciously tried not to draw attention to themselves, lest they be noticed by immigration authorities, she said. "How are people going to prove this when they've been trying not to show they exist?"

She suggested one answer to her question may be



San Francisco Auxiliary Bishop Ignatius Wang speaks during a press conference at Mission San Rafael at which northern California religious leaders called for an end to raids by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.



Anton Parker, holding a sign, confronts Mike Davis, a Golden Gate Minuteman Project, a network opposed to immigrants entering the U.S. illegally, during a rally in San Rafael, CA.



U.S. President George W. Bush walks near the U.S.-Mexico border with Ron Colburn, the agent in charge of the Yuma sector of U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Yuma, Ariz., April 9. Bush visited the area with Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, far left, to highlight his immigration reform plan. CNS photos

to use records from churches where they have been active or schools where their children have been enrolled.

But as Cecile Motus, director of the office of Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, pointed out, many immigrants never register in their parishes because that's not the practice in their home countries.

"Parish life is very different in our homelands," said Motus, a Philippine immigrant. "For many, at home, once you're baptized, you're registered in the parish for life."

Jeff Chenoweth, director of national programs for CLINIC, said the church could be especially helpful in how immigrants become integrated into U.S. society.

"Legal status is a significant form of integration," Chenoweth said. Once immigrants' fear of being deported is gone, they become more free to become involved in society at various levels, he explained.

"It enables them to reunite with their families, become more stable and prosperous," he said. It also makes it easier for people to become involved in community organizations, politics, their children's schools and other activities.

The church should be ready to help people take those steps, he said, as well as offer English and civics classes, and maybe create a system — such as free e-mail accounts — for contacting people.

There is no assurance Congress will pass an immigration reform bill, and nobody is predicting what it might include. But Democratic leaders and President George W. Bush support a legalization plan and there appear to be too few opponents in Congress to stop one from being included.

Assorted public opinion polls show a majority of Americans support including a legalization plan in immigration reform.

The Senate is scheduled to take up immigration reform in May. Leaders say they expect the House to get

Elvira Arellano, 32, and her son, Saul, 8, attend a service in Adalberto United Methodist Church in Chicago. Mexican-born Arellano, 32, has been fighting a deportation order from inside the church where she has lived for eight months in hopes that immigration authorities will not enter to deport her. Advocates from more than 66 Catholic dioceses took their campaign for immigration reform to Capitol Hill April 19.



to it during the summer. Last year, the House and Senate passed vastly different immigration bills and the two bodies were unable to reconcile them.

As those bills moved through Congress, however, CLINIC began to look ahead and in November published a manual for legal service providers on preparing for legalization.

Its recommendations include the philosophical — making a conscious commitment about whether to participate and to what extent — and the nuts-and-bolts practical — recruiting lawyers and volunteers and starting community outreach so people know where to turn for information about legalization.

A background paper on legalization prepared by CLINIC senior attorney Peggy Gleason last summer notes that for the 1986 program nobody had experience with running a legalization system.

"We were starting from zero," Gleason's paper said. "Now we have 158 affiliates and some of them still have staff who went through legalization 20 years ago." That process predated the common use of computers, e-mail and other instant messaging systems.

But many lessons about staffing, training and gathering office equipment are pertinent, she said. "We are in the position to say it has been done before," and some of the challenges and responses are remembered. ¶

