

Exploring Immigrants' Problems; Lending Them a Helping Hand.

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As the three dozen or so people attending a recent meeting on immigration wrestled with the complexities of this issue, a representative of one of Virginia's most conservative senators, Ken Cuccinelli (R-37th), explained his position on it.

"We're concerned about crime, and [there are] over 100 bills addressing immigration in the General Assembly," said Eve Barner, invited by meeting hosts Alice Foltz and Wellspring United Church of Christ to speak at the Jan. 31 gathering in Chantilly.

BARNER SAID the bills fell into three main categories. Employer-focused bills dealt with legislation geared toward requiring companies or individuals working for the government to show their employees' legal status.

Others focused on immigrants who commit crimes while here. But adding to the problem, said Barner, is that, "Often, illegal-immigrant girls don't go to the authorities when older boys rape them." Still other bills dealt with justice issues such as establishing penalties for human traffickers.

However, a bill she didn't mention was on the mind of attorney Edgar Aranda, who represents and advocates for immigrants. "What was the spirit of [Cuccinelli's] bill regarding people having an inability to speak English in the workplace?" he asked.

"It would constitute misconduct and they could be fired," replied Barner. "It's an opportunity bill. This provides an opportunity for people who can speak English to get that job and improve their English."

Hearing that explanation, one woman in the audience said she "felt like [she] was in a spin zone. That was the most bizarre answer I ever heard." And Rob Rutland-Brown of Just Neighbors, which provides legal services to low-income immigrants, asked rhetorically, "Did anyone ask if the immigrants wanted that bill?"

And Mukit Hossain, founder of Project Hope and Harmony, said, "Every immigrant community opposed that bill — so, apparently, they didn't want that particular opportunity." Added Mary Lee Cerillo, chairman of the Sully District Democratic Party: "It's an opportunity for the employer to fire them and not give unemployment benefits, and to discriminate against both legal and illegal immigrants."

Although Barner then said the bill "failed in committee," on Monday, Feb. 11, it was tentatively approved by the House.

Hossain said the rhetoric in the last election cycle was "extremely dangerous — legal immigrants were being profiled, as well as illegal [ones]." And ACLU member Stephen Vandivere of Centreville's Cabell's Mill community said the ACLU is "interested in laws pertaining to the rights of illegal immigrants or involving racial profiling."

Laura Valle of Leesburg warned that, "As we move toward immigration reform, we have to acknowledge that some people don't have the best intentions toward immigrants — and that's part of the problem." Hossain said the immigration laws are difficult for attorneys to comprehend, yet [we're] asking someone handing someone a sandwich to figure them out."

HAYMARKET'S Alanna Almeda said immigration is a "population-growth issue, not just a legal issue." However, Hossain noted that the number of illegal immigrants in the U.S. is only "a small fraction of the population coming in legally."

"How do we help the people adjust to being here?" asked Elena Schlossberg of Haymarket. "And how do we explain [to immigrants] what the issues are — for example, having too many people in one home or not taking care of their lawn?"

"It's a complex issue," said David Ellis, with the county executive's office. "In Fairfax County, there's not a majority minority; we're extremely diverse."

Aranda said the Baby Boomers will retire soon and "there'll be a big problem in the workforce. So instead of mocking and [railing] against immigrants, we should be passionate about working with them because they're going to keep our workforce together."

Added meeting moderator Al Fuytes: "They are part of our community and, whether we like it or not, they are there. We are all interconnected, whether you realize it or not."

Foltz wanted to know the day laborers' needs. "Are they able to find work?" she asked. "I know their presence is disturbing to some people in the community, and what can we do about that?"

Ellis said many can't find jobs. But, he said, "This dialogue is a great start in discussing how do you bring people of all different races and cultures together. It gives people the opportunity to go outside their comfort zone to help others. And with the [Knolls of Newgate] apartment complex in Centreville that was recently torn down, they're more visible. So how can we reach out to them and move forward?"

After the Herndon day-labor site shut down, replied Hossain, several churches fed the workers a hot lunch and helped teach them English. "I think, if we did that here, it would be a very worthwhile effort," he said. "And not all day laborers are illegal; we had about 250 day laborers in Herndon and a large majority were not illegal."

"I think we're experiencing a pandemic of xenophobia," said Vandivere. "We should make information about help and services available to them on the county Web site — in their language." Agreeing, Diana Gomez de Molina of the United Church of Christ, said she's concerned about Afghani and Korean women "who are being abused here and have no voice. So we need to make our services available to them in their languages, too."

RUTLAND-BROWN told her, "We could help by educating people about their rights. And the churches could play a role; people are less fearful to come to ESL classes or learn about their rights at a church." Fuertes then asked for other suggestions.

"We should accept that people are generally good, human beings, but acknowledge that their immigration status is not an OK situation," said Valle. "The impact of illegal immigrants on us is negligible," added Schlossberg. "At some point, we have to stop arguing about their number, and legal vs. illegal, and move on to the solutions."

Suggestions made at the meeting included having people contact their congressmen and establishing an electronic bulletin board to help immigrants find services. Cheryl Repetti of the Centreville Community Foundation said CCF's Web site could provide a discussion forum where people could chat online about immigration and make positive suggestions.

In summary, Fuertes said, "We're trying to transcend the complexity of this issue so we can continue to do what we can as a community

concerned about the plight of some of our members living among us.
After all, that is the essence of a community."



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