

Catholic Conference of Ohio

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Ohio Catholic Bishops Issue Letter of Concern Regarding Possible Undocumented Immigrant Enforcement Legislation

Ohio legislative leaders proposed in August 2006 an outline of a legislative package they would like introduced and enacted this fall. A basic feature of this package would give state and local law enforcement personnel heightened authority to arrest and deport immigrant workers who do not have proper entry documentation.

The Catholic Bishops' letter highlights the following concerns:

1. A strong preference for the creation of a statewide study commission prior to introduction of specific legislation. The study commission should be comprised of interested parties including federal and state officials, business and religious leaders, and worker representatives.
2. A belief that state and local enforcement of "illegal presence" in Ohio, a role currently under the responsibility of federal officials, will be "harmfully provocative" during this time of heightened rhetoric and violence against immigrant workers. The proposed legislative outline has the potential to fuel the fires of prejudice, profiling and paranoia.
3. A strong need for the Ohio General Assembly to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level. Such reform should include a more workable *guest worker* program and provide a viable path to citizenship for current immigrant workers.
4. The proposed state legislative outline duplicates existing federal law restrictions and raises many legal and financial questions.
5. The proposed state legislative outline leaves a false impression that current immigrant workers are more of a security and safety threat to Ohioans than other persons. We fear that local arrest authority based solely on suspected illegal entry will drive current undocumented workers further "underground". Immigrants will be less likely to report serious crimes to local authorities for fear of deportation.
6. The proposed state legislative outline fails to reflect the important and necessary contributions immigrant workers provide to the common good of our state through the work they perform and taxes they pay.

The Bishops' letter encourages thoughtful study and dialogue on this extremely complex issue of immigration reform. The Ohio Catholic Bishops' statement: *God's Welcoming Presence: A Call To Stand In Solidarity With Ohio's Immigrants* was referenced. This statement emphasized the vital contributions immigrant workers, regardless of their legal status, provide to our communities and our state's economy.

Background materials were also provided to legislative leaders addressing various myths and facts about immigration. This material was adapted from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' educational program entitled *Justice for Immigrants*.

The *Justice for Immigrants* website can be accessed at: <http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org>.

