



Bishops concerned about proposed immigration bill

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By Dennis Sadowski, Editor, Universe Bulletin

Ohio's bishops say they are planning to work with legislative leaders to minimize the impact of an immigration bill introduced last week in the Ohio House on the thousands of undocumented immigrants in the state.

Meeting in Columbus Wednesday, the bishops reviewed HB 654, the Workplace Protection and Illegal Alien Enforcement Act. "We're going to try to bring about as much justice (for immigrants) as we can," Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk said following the meeting. "We're going to have our staff talk with legislators and try to refine the bill to make sure there is as little as possible in it that we can't swallow." Although the strong enforcement-only components proposed last month by Senate and House leaders are missing from the bill, Archbishop Pilarczyk said concerns remain. "Our biggest concern is the economic impact of the immigrants (on Ohio)," Archbishop Pilarczyk said. "What would happen if they all went home tomorrow?"

The bill was introduced by Rep. Bill Seitz, R-Cincinnati, a staunch supporter of immigration control. A companion bill, SB 368, has been introduced in the Ohio Senate by Sen. Gary Cates, R.-West Chester.

Earlier, in a September 1, 2006 letter to legislative leaders, Archbishop Pilarczyk and the Catholic Conference of Ohio urged caution in the drafting of any legislation affecting immigrants. The Conference, which represents the church's position on legislative and public policy issues, renewed its call for a commission to study the needs of immigrants and business owners as well as the concerns of public officials before the state adopts specific legislation. Having local police and sheriff departments become defacto enforcers of immigration law remains the bishops' primary concern. "We're saying let the enforcement be a federal issue," Archbishop Pilarczyk said.

Government officials and immigrant advocates estimate that 75,000 to 100,000 undocumented immigrants are in Ohio. Seitz, however, isn't about to budge from his position. He said his bill would establish a framework for cooperative enforcement between the state and federal governments. He described the bill as less forceful than what Ohio Senate President Bill Harris R- Ashland, and Ohio House Speaker Jon Husted, R-Kettering, called for during an August press conference. He also denied that HR 654 would allow local police and sheriff departments to stop someone on the street for no reason other than the basis of racial profiling. In a September 13 written response to the Catholic Conference of Ohio, Seitz told Archbishop Pilarczyk that "your concerns that the bill poses legal questions or will fuel 'prejudice, profiling and paranoia' are misplaced." "I'm more than happy to work with the bishops on their concerns," Seitz later told the UB.

The Seitz bill would direct the Ohio attorney general to pursue an agreement with the U.S. attorney general on the enforcement of federal immigration laws in the state. Ohio would open an Office of Immigration Compliance which would oversee investigations into undocumented immigrants and work with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under the bill. If passed, the bill also would:

- Prohibit state agencies from contracting with companies that knowingly employ undocumented immigrants.
- Prohibit the use of undocumented immigrant labor on state-financed projects.
- Require adults receiving state public assistance to verify U.S. citizenship.
- Limit state scholarships, financial aid and in-state tuition to legal Ohio residents.
- Establish the Office of Immigration Outreach, a clearinghouse for immigrants on how to comply with state and federal laws and legally obtain benefits and services.
- Prohibit anyone from extorting an undocumented immigrant by threatening to report them to immigration officials.

Seitz said his concern arises from undocumented immigrants who are trying to bypass the normal process of obtaining legal residency. "Those most disadvantaged are those who are playing by the rules and waiting to enter this country legally," he said. "This bill would put an end to the flood tide of illegal aliens cutting to the front of the line. Many Ohioans are offended by that."

Legislative hearings are not expected until after the November 7 election. Seitz said he expects the legislation to pass by the end of the year. Seitz was questioned by two local representatives during his testimony introducing the legislation on September 12. Rep. Tim DeGeeter, D-Parma, and Rep. Mike Foley, D-Cleveland, both members of the House Judiciary Committee, questioned the impact of the bill on the state budget. "Part of this is a big government bill," DeGeeter, a member of St. Francis de Sales Church, Parma, told the UB. "It'll create a whole new layer in the attorney general's office."

Foley, a member of St. Patrick Church-Bridge Avenue, Cleveland, wondered how much of a problem undocumented immigrants are in the state. "Illegal immigration is a federal issue," he said. "If the federal government believes there's a role for the states, then they should make immigration reform uniform for every state."

Citing a laundry list of reasons, immigrant advocates are calling for the bill's defeat. "This is a political wedge issue on the state level. It's being introduced to get people riled up," said Ruben Castilla Herrera of Columbus, who has organized a statewide coalition focusing on the rights of immigrants. He expressed concern that any training local law enforcement officers receive under the bill could lead to all Hispanics being "profiled and targeted" for questioning and possible arrest. The advocates are planning to be ready to testify at hearings when they begin.

Within the diocese, the Office of Hispanic Ministry has been working in coalition with parishes and other advocacy groups to pursue comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level. Director Misael Mayorga said he and other staff members have seen a growing sense of concern among Hispanics. They are seeing a growing number of Hispanic immigrants are reducing their participation at local parishes because they fear being targeted by police should they be seen in public. "They won't stop working even with a stricter law, but people are afraid to go to church," Mayorga said.

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