

MICHIANA POINT OF VIEW

Cruel 'reform' hurts immigrants and robs our community

By LISA KOOP

Until Indiana winters wore it away, I used to have a bumper sticker on my car that read, "No Human Being is Illegal." With that sticker, I hoped to convey the message that being an undocumented immigrant in the United States does not make a person, in and of herself, illegal. One cannot be an illegal person. Or so I thought.

Recently representatives James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., and Peter King, R-N.Y., introduced H.R. 4437, a piece of enforcement-only immigration reform legislation that, if passed, could make an undocumented person's very existence in our communities a crime. It could also allow the government to prosecute almost any American who helps or has regular contact with undocumented people. It would further restrict our already draconian immigration laws and do nothing to alleviate the over-burdened, under-resourced immigration system that currently exists.

Here in northern Indiana, we witness the realities of our current immigration policies. We see the flesh-and-blood repercussions of our nation's inhumane and unbending immigration laws. High school teachers in our communities are frustrated because there is little incentive for promising students who are undocumented to perform well in school. Employers are unable to hire capable workers who cannot produce a valid Social Security number.

Health care providers encounter undocumented patients suffering from preventable illnesses that have gone untreated because there are few resources available to

people ineligible for Medicaid. Some community development organizations are unable to provide housing for families who cannot demonstrate legal residence.

For most undocumented people, there is no way to gain status under the current system. If an undocumented person has a close family member with status, he or she is only in marginally better shape. Right now, a United States citizen will wait 13 years before her sister from Mexico will be legally allowed to join her in the United States. A lawful permanent resident will wait nearly seven years before he can be reunited with his Mexican wife.

We cannot ask people to remain separated from their family members, nor can we expect them to return to or remain in their home countries when they are incapable of providing for their families in their native lands.

To truly welcome all people, we need true immigration reform. We need our representatives to understand that enforcement-only immigration reform, like H.R. 4437, will only drive undocumented people further into the shadows and rob us of the gifts they bring to our communities.

Please call, email or write U.S. Rep. Chris Chocola, R-Bristol; and U.S. senators Evan Bayh, D-Ind., and Richard Lugar, R-Ind. Tell them northern Indiana is a welcoming community and we want them to support the kind of immigration reform that recognizes reality and celebrates diversity. We want each member of our community to have the ability to contribute to the betterment of us all.

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