

# **LAW SENDS IMMIGRANTS SCRAMBLING; MEASURE IS 'PUNITIVE,' SAY MANY HISPANIC RESIDENTS**

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## **Body**

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After living legally in the United States for 17 years, Ileana Mayer last March became a citizen more out of anxiety than anything else.

Mayer, a native of Nicaragua who is married and lives in suburban Minneapolis, was convinced of that after hearing reports that federal lawmakers were about to sign legislation aimed at cracking down on illegal immigration that also contained provisions that would curb benefits for legal immigrants.

"It made me realize I'm vulnerable right now," she said.

The bill, passed Wednesday by the House by nearly a three-to-one margin, includes a number of provisions pertaining to legal immigrants, one of which would increase up to 100 percent the minimum income U.S. residents would have to earn before they could sponsor a family member for immigration.

Democrats and Republicans are debating the measure in the Senate.

Another provision in the bill would tighten eligibility requirements for Medicaid and make legal immigrants who receive a year of welfare benefits during their first seven years here subject to deportation.

"This is outrageous. This is a punitive law," said Margarita Zalamea, executive director of the state of Minnesota's Chicano Latino Affairs Council, who received dozens of calls and urgent faxes this week from local agencies that work with immigrants who are concerned about the proposals.

"This is about families being kept apart from one another," she said. "Right now there's such a bad climate toward those who are not U.S. citizens. If they are going to start messing around with our rights as U.S. citizens, what's next?"

The council is urging people to call U.S. Sens. Paul Wellstone and Rod Grams and the White House to object to the proposals.

Immigrants also are being encouraged to join a march for immigrant rights planned for Oct. 12 in Washington, D.C. Organizers have planned a 6 p.m. public forum tonight to discuss the march at St. Stephens School at 2211 Clinton Ave. S, Minneapolis. Among the speakers will be Oscar Tellez of Chicago, who is one of the national organizers of the march led by Cordinadora '96, a group based in Los Angeles.

Topics will include welfare reform, attacks on immigration rights, deportations, immigration raids and access to education and public health.

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To reach the local organizing effort, Cordinadora '96 Minnesota, call 348-8550. The local group plans to send about 50 people by bus to Washington.

One person planning to attend the march in Washington is Eduardo Barrera, who is hoping 170 people would be willing to pay \$165 plus tax to charter a plane from Minnesota.

If he can't get 170 people, Barrera said he will go alone.

"We want to go to Washington and show that we are united and we are going to fight for our rights and to be treated with dignity and respect," Barrera said, likening the planned march to last year's Million Man March that drew hundreds of thousands of African-Americans to the Lincoln Memorial.

"I want my community to participate in this, and I want the community to get the respect that we deserve. Since this is an election year, obviously some politicians are using us (immigrants) and using this time of elections to pass all these bills."

After studying together for about six months to prepare for the citizenship test, Mayer and her 74-year-old mother, who has been in the United States for about 11 or 12 years, took the oath during swearing-in ceremony in Minneapolis on March 20. They are among the hundreds of legal immigrants in Minnesota who have decided to become citizens because of an increased sense of vulnerability.

According to Dean Hove, acting district director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Bloomington, 3,669 people became citizens during fiscal 1994, 5,408 in fiscal 1995, and this year more than 7,000 are expected to take the oath.

"If the immigration bill passes, we expect an even greater increase next year," Hove said.

For Mayer, an international sales representative for a Twin-Cities-based two-way radio communications company, the biggest issue was knowing that she would have to resign citizenship in Nicaragua.

"It's a very serious and dramatic experience when they make you swear that this is the only country," she said. "It's kind of emotional."

But she is happy she made the decision to become a citizen and is anxious to vote in the November elections. "I'm going to be part of the decision-making in this country. Before, I was an observer," she said. "I can hardly wait. If I happen to be out of the country, I'm going to get an absentee ballot."

#### Taking action

Organizers of the Oct. 12 march in Washington, D.C., will hold a 6 p.m. public forum tonight at St. Stephens School, 2211 Clinton Ave. S, Minneapolis. Topics will include welfare reform, attacks on immigration rights, deportations, immigration raids and access to education and public health. To reach Cordinadora '96 Minnesota, call 348-8550.

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