

Aide urges extended immigrant privileges; State must recognize all Mexicans, he says

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Body

A top **aide** to Mexican President Vicente Fox argued in Atlanta Thursday that Georgians should **recognize** the contributions of undocumented **immigrants** by **extending** some rights available to legal **immigrants** and citizens.

Juan Hernandez, director of the Presidential Office of **Mexicans** Abroad, **said** he supports a national proposal to let **Mexicans** hold temporary jobs legally and another that could legalize up to 3 million **Mexicans** who are in the United **States** without permission.

"The priority is to have them come out of the shadows," he **said**. "They are good people who contribute to both economies."

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Hernandez **urged** Georgia legislators to let illegal **immigrants** get driver's licenses and pay in-**state** college tuition, both currently reserved for U.S. citizens and documented **immigrants**. And he **said** local police should tell foreign nationals who are arrested that they have the right to contact their consulate. A treaty the United **States** ratified in 1969 gives foreign nationals that right, but police often do not tell suspects about it.

"We **must** change our way of looking at **Mexicans** who are here," **said** Hernandez, a U.S. citizen who was born in Texas and raised in Mexico. He met with business and community leaders of Mexican descent and some **immigrant** families in Atlanta.

His pitch comes at a time of shifting national attitudes toward **immigrants**, particularly those from Mexico. A panel appointed by President Bush is considering proposals to legalize up to 3 million illegal **immigrants** from Mexico, and there is support in Congress for plans to legally regulate the flow of migrants crossing the border.

Legislators in Texas recently voted to let illegal **immigrants** pay in-**state** tuition, and Tennessee joined North Carolina, Utah and Virginia this year in making it easier for undocumented **immigrants** to get driver's licenses.

The University System of Georgia told public colleges and universities last year to admit academically qualified students regardless of immigration status, but those students pay out-of-**state** tuition. Remedios Gomez Arnau, Mexican Consul General in Atlanta, **said** she has talked with **state** legislators about letting undocumented students pay in-**state** rates.

She also has talked with legislators about driver's licenses. She **says** licensing undocumented **immigrants** would teach them the rules of the road and let them buy auto insurance.

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Opponents **say** it makes no sense to **recognize** people whose presence violates federal law. In March, in the waning days of the last legislative session, a Democratic legislator filed a bill to let undocumented **immigrants** get driver's licenses and Republicans created a commission to study the issue.

The Mexican Consulate estimates about 450,000 **Mexicans** live in Georgia, and that half are illegal **immigrants**.

Its estimate of Georgia's overall Hispanic population --- 550,000 --- is higher than that of the U.S. Census Bureau.

The census **says** the **state**'s Hispanic population surged 300 percent from 1990 to 2000, to about 435,000.

Hernandez **said** many illegal **immigrants** work under fake Social Security numbers and have income taxes withheld from their paychecks. He **said** they deserve respect.

"The priority is to dignify these people," he **said**.

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