

## **Ready to Fight 'Tooth and Nail';**

### **Area's Latinos Fear Effects Of Calif.'s Proposition 187**

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## **Body**

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In Takoma Park, Henry Quintero, a retired Foreign Service officer and advocate for Latino rights, received an anonymous phone call last week threatening to send him and his kind "to the gas chambers and the firing squads."

In Arlington, Latino members of the Rev. Jose Eugenio Hoyos's church began collecting blankets and food for an expected wave of relatives fleeing California.

In the District, Yvonne Martinez Vega, who runs a social and legal services agency for **Latinos**, said her office received a number of calls from worried parents asking if they should keep their children home from school.

The impact of **Proposition 187**, the referendum measure that swept to victory in California last week on a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, already is being felt among Latino communities in the greater Washington area, raising **fears** of increased hostility, discrimination and economic burdens on Latino families.

Local Latino leaders take some comfort in the fact that a federal judge in Los Angeles has temporarily blocked enforcement of the new law, which bans educational, social and non-emergency medical services for illegal immigrants. They also say attitudes toward undocumented residents in this region are more tolerant than in California, where their numbers are higher and the economy weaker.

"After Prop. **187** passed, I thought, 'My God, we'll be next.' But I also have some wishful thinking that the D.C. area is different than California and won't react the same way," said Martinez Vega, who directs the Ayuda agency in Adams-Morgan. "They may try to come here, but this community is no longer passive and silent. They will **fight** it **tooth** and **nail**."

But immigrant advocates **fear** that the electoral success of **Proposition 187** may give renewed impetus to legislative proposals in Maryland and Virginia with similar goals, all of which so far either have run into legislative hurdles or failed to be implemented.

"People in my congregation are confused and afraid. Some of them think the same thing may start here and they may lose their jobs. We have to reassure them but also prepare them for whatever happens," said Hoyos, who ministers to nearly 2,000 Latino immigrants at St. Anthony's Catholic Church.

In Maryland, a bill to make English the official state language passed both houses of the legislature early this year, but it was vetoed by Gov. William Donald Schaefer after Latino and civil rights groups organized last-minute protests. Now, proponents say they are likely to reintroduce the measure and expect to find even more support.

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"I think 1995 will be the year. Our message is getting clearer and clearer," said Mauro Mujica, chairman of US English, a national lobbying group that promotes the use of English in schools and government agencies. Mujica said his group's aim is to help immigrants by improving their English skills, but opponents have called such measures xenophobic and punitive.

In Virginia, Gov. George Allen and several legislators have sought to prevent undocumented immigrants from receiving certain education and health benefits. A more sweeping bill, championed early this year by state Sen. Warren E. Barry (R-Fairfax), asked the state to identify all undocumented immigrants, calculate the cost of public services they had obtained and report the immigrants to federal authorities "for deportation or for debt collection." That bill is held up in a legislative committee.

In an interview this week, Barry expressed bewilderment over criticism that he is anti-immigrant, saying he seeks only to prevent state funds from being spent on illegal residents. He said that last year \$ 24 million was spent to educate undocumented children in Fairfax County and an additional \$ 4 million was spent on emergency medical services to undocumented residents statewide.

"I'm not sure we should go as far as to initiate a **Proposition 187** in Virginia, but we have shortfalls in revenue, and we cannot continue to fund a tidal wave of people in this country," he said. "You can't blame people in poor countries from wanting to come here, but we also have to protect this society as we know it."

It is unclear how many undocumented immigrants live in the region, but the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service estimated that in 1992 there were about 14,000 in the District, 27,000 in Maryland and 37,000 in Virginia, with the great majority clustered in the D.C. suburbs. Immigrant advocates say the number could be higher.

Some legislators in both states said they are bracing for a surge of anti-immigrant proposals, but they said their concern is tempered by the legal challenges already being raised to **Proposition 187**. Citing questions about due process, the judge in Los Angeles also temporarily blocked the law's requirement that social service agencies report suspected illegal residents.

"I'm sure something similar or worse [than Barry's bill] will be resurrected, but I'm equally sure we'll respond immediately through the courts should it pass. The Constitution is on our side," said Virginia Del. L. Karen Darner (D-Arlington). She noted that school officials in Virginia had strongly opposed cutting off benefits to children or using them to ferret out undocumented parents.

In the District, Mayor-elect Marion Barry has courted support from **Latinos** and other immigrant groups, and he has vowed to protect the rights of undocumented residents. But immigrant advocates **fear** that Congress could now seek to cut off funds for city services to the undocumented.

Since the passage of **Proposition 187**, the D.C.-based Latino Civil Rights Task Force has spearheaded an effort to counter the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment. Yesterday, about 200 protesters picketed a speech at the Heritage Foundation on Capitol Hill by California Gov. Pete Wilson (R), a champion of **Proposition 187**. They carried signs saying "Deport Wilson" and "No to the Politics of Hate."

"This is a country of immigrants. We all want to earn an honest living. The policies in California are inhumane and racist," said a Salvadoran marcher, Julio Cesar Alonzo, 58, who took the day off from his job as a gardener.

Activists are especially eager to debunk the popular myth that undocumented immigrants take more from the system in public benefits than they give back.

"There is so much misinformation being spread around. We need to keep publicizing the positive statistics," said Quintero, who is deputy director of the task force chapter in Montgomery County. In a recent newspaper column, he pointed out that Latino immigrants have high rates of intact families and enrollment in English classes and low levels of homelessness and welfare use.

A more immediate concern is that the temporary amnesty that protects tens of thousands of Central Americans in this area will not be renewed when it expires in December, instantly ending their legal right to be in the United

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States. The amnesty has been extended twice, but with the sharp rightward tilt in national politics, the Clinton administration will face new pressure not to renew it.

"I have my heart in my hands, wondering what I will do if they ever deport me. They say there is peace in my country now, but it's not true," said Paula Velasco, a 45-year-old Salvadoran widow in Arlington who provides day care for Latino children. She came here illegally during the civil war in El Salvador and was allowed to remain under the amnesty program.

A nephew of Velasco's is in far worse straits. Three months ago, he fled El Salvador after his teenage son was gunned down by armed men in a truck. He crossed the border into California on foot one week before **Proposition 187** passed, speaking no English and unaware of the surge of hostility toward illegal immigrants. Now, he is virtually in hiding in the area.

"I mostly sit here, walking in circles," he said in an interview this week. "I want to work, but I can't go out. People told me something bad was happening in California, but I didn't understand it. I would like to go home, but there are so many horrible things happening there. What would you do?"

## Graphic

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PHOTO, PAULA VELASCO, A SALVADORAN, **FEARS** SHE COULD LOSE AMNESTY PROTECTION AND BE DEPORTED. JOHN MCDONNELL

## Classification

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