

Forum looks at immigrants

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Body

Security measures designed to thwart terrorists have unfairly targeted immigrants - both legal and illegal - and proposed changes could be even worse, according to civil libertarians and attorneys at a forum on U.S. policy Wednesday.

"(The government's policies are) so unconnected to terrorism and homeland security, and this administration that talks so much about family values is tearing families apart," said Tampa immigration attorney Carole Mehlman.

She was part of a forum held Wednesday night at Viva la Frida Cafe-Galeria in Seminole Heights on the impact of current and proposed federal legislation on immigrant communities.

The forum was hosted by the West Central Florida office of the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida and focused in part on a pending intelligence reform bill with controversial immigration provisions.

Mehlman criticized a broader swath of immigration policy, calling President Bush's ideas about a guest-worker program for what are now predominantly illegal immigrant workers a recipe for "indentured servitude."

She also blasted the administration's deportation of Haitians back to their poverty and storm-ravaged land, saying other immigrants are treated more favorably.

Other panelists decried the ongoing surveillance of Arab and Muslim communities under a new FBI initiative launched in October, a policy they traced to the days after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when hundreds of Arab and Muslim men were detained, said Dalia Hashad. She's the ACLU's advocate for Muslims, Arabs and South Asians.

Many of those men were detained without access to lawyers, for minor immigration violations, such as students' failure to tell immigration authorities about switching colleges, Hashad said.

None of those detentions turned up terrorists, she said.

But one local congressional representative contacted by phone said immigration restrictions are needed to protect taxpayers and legal immigrants while thwarting potential terrorist attacks.

A pending piece of legislation got much of the spotlight Wednesday night. The intelligence reform bill has stalled in Congress, in part over immigration provisions. The bill would create a national director of intelligence based on recommendations of the Sept. 11 Commission. But some House members blocked it in November - over President Bush's objections - fearing that it would have weakened military control over battlefield intelligence, and demanding that it include provisions cracking down on illegal immigration. Another vote is expected next week.

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Activists said the immigration provisions wanted by some House Republicans would stop states from giving driver's licenses to illegal **immigrants** but also would have made it harder for legal **immigrants** to get licenses by refusing to acknowledge foreign-based forms of identity, such as passports. Also, they said, **immigrants** could be deported to countries that practice torture.

Contacted by phone, U.S. Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite defended the immigration provisions. Foreign-issued identifications, like the matricula consular carried by Mexican workers, are a loophole through which terrorists could enter the country and board planes, said Brown-Waite, R-Crystal River.

As for those seeking political asylum, "it's up to them to prove it," she said of their persecution. "Any terrorist could make that same claim and seek political asylum here when their goal is to blow up Dade City."

Patrice Webb, national 9/11 organizer for the ACLU, said the bill's immigration provisions threaten to harm everyone's rights. She noted that the Cuban American National Foundation, usually at odds with the ACLU, signed a joint letter with her agency against the provisions.

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