

Immigration Reform Growing at the Grassroots

Washingtonpost.com

October 2, 2003 Thursday 10:54 PM

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washingtonpost.com

Section: WORLD

Length: 803 words

Byline: Special to washingtonpost.com

Body

Just days before Sept. 11, 2001, President Bush was committed to significantly overhauling the current immigration system - a system so broken that millions enter this country without a trace in a risky run across the border, and then work without permits and basic workplace protections.

In the two years since, Washington has made no grand gesture to reform immigration. Instead, a dragnet has swept across the land, detaining thousands of immigrants and secretly deporting hundreds. This de facto overhaul of the immigration system has become painful evidence that the nation Bush once described as "more, not less, American" because of its immigrants, has changed.

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Yet, despite the new era of the Patriot Act and its threats of deportation, most illegal immigrants remain convinced that the chance for a better life here is still worth the risk. And, in part, what gives them hope in what some describe as one of the most hostile environments for immigrants in years, is the proliferation of small gestures on local and state levels that are making big differences in their lives.

These gestures are tacit recognition of the presence of illegal immigrants and their needs and contributions to society. They appeal to a community's sense of justice and, little by little, they nudge along a federal system playing catch-up with the rest of the nation.

In Northern California, for instance, farmers in Napa County, home to a \$4 billion wine industry, last year agreed to tax themselves to help provide better housing for their immigrant field workers, most of them Mexicans. Their intention: to make living conditions more humane for laborers they cannot do without.

Last week, the town council in the Washington suburb of Herndon, Va., approved a temporary shelter for day laborers. Supporters argued successfully that the site would provide some order for an already extant but disorganized practice of local immigrants gathering on roadsides and in parking lots looking for work. A similar structure is already being built -- for similar reasons -- in nearby Arlington County.

In a trend that began just two years ago, seven states now allow undocumented immigrants who have fulfilled all other residency requirements to qualify for lower in-state tuition at their colleges and universities. And at least 19 states now issue driver's licenses to those who lack legal residency -- despite security concerns raised after 9/11.

Even non-U.S. documentation, the Mexican-issued consular cards or matriculas consulares are being accepted as a legitimate form of identification by an increasing number of local authorities, particularly police departments. Last

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month, the U.S. Treasury Department decided the cards could be used to open bank accounts, a decision that drew praise from financial institutions nationwide and further legitimized the documents.

Other Latin American countries are sure to follow the matricula model. Already, governments in El Salvador and Nicaragua are considering the issuance of such documents for their citizens living here. If nothing else, the matriculas help to document the undocumented, facilitating the work of authorities here.

There is perhaps no clearer symbol of how **immigration reform** has been paralyzed than the fact that Bush barely mentions the "I" word in his speeches now.

Still, the issue will not go away, even on the national level. Those who don't stand in the president's precarious position of trying to block the influx of future terrorists while not appearing to be anti-immigrant can make the smaller local and state gestures or even introduce legislation proposing smaller **reforms** at the federal level.

Just last week, for instance, a bill was proposed in Congress to give legal residency to illegal farm workers, who represent at least half of the agricultural labor force. This would be less than 10 percent of the 8 million immigrants living here undocumented.

The bipartisan measure is supported by farmers and farm workers alike and has drawn praise as a first good step from even the most active pro-immigrant forces -- the Freedom Riders of 2003 -- who converged in Washington this week to draw attention to the plight of immigrant workers, legal and illegal. Traveling by bus from cities all around the country, these hundreds of immigrants and their supporters are inspired by the original 1961 Freedom Rides.

The original riders traveled federal highways into the Deep South to challenge the practice of segregating bus stations and other public places in violation of federal law. In an ironic twist of history, these new pro-immigrant freedom riders are journeying from many of the places where changes are already occurring to prod Washington to join the trend.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: **IMMIGRATION** (93%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); DEPORTATION (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); US PATRIOT ACT (78%); NATIONAL SECURITY (77%); POLITICAL DETAINEES (73%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (73%); CITY GOVERNMENT (72%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (72%); LICENSES & PERMITS (72%); TREASURY DEPARTMENTS (70%); LIVING CONDITIONS (69%); POLICE FORCES (66%); PUBLIC FINANCE AGENCIES & TREASURIES (62%); TUITION FEES (60%); CITIES (50%); DRIVERS LICENSES (50%)

Industry: TREASURY DEPARTMENTS (70%); PARKING SPACES & FACILITIES (62%); PUBLIC FINANCE AGENCIES & TREASURIES (62%); BANKING & FINANCE (60%); DRIVERS LICENSES (50%); ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE INDUSTRY (50%)

Person: GEORGE W BUSH (58%)

Geographic: SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, CA, USA (79%); VIRGINIA, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%); MEXICO (92%); EL SALVADOR (79%); LATIN AMERICA (78%)

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Load-Date: December 1, 2003

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