

## **INS RESPONDS TO LATINO ACTIVISTS' DEMANDS;**

## **REGIONAL HEAD AGREES TO MODEST MEASURES**

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**Byline:** Maja Beckstrom, Staff Writer

### **Body**

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In response to demands from Latino activists, the regional head of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service agreed Saturday to recruit bilingual staff and push for expanded services at a soon-to-open satellite office in St. Paul.

It was a small victory for more than 350 people who turned out in First Lutheran Church on St. Paul's East Side to hear the INS district director, Curtis Aljets, respond to a list of demands from a coalition of churches. The INS district consists of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Most requests involved providing bilingual services, Spanish translation of documents and greater access to family members held in detention. The meeting was part of a larger campaign to prevent immigrant families from being torn apart by INS policies and enforcement of laws against illegal residents.

"We're saying OK, we might not be able to change the law now, but we can at least have the INS treat people with more dignity and more respect," said Carl Valdez, a deacon at Sacred Heart Church in St. Paul.

"The people who are picked up, they don't get the information they need; they can't reach their families; they're asked to sign voluntary exit orders and half the time they don't know what they're signing," Valdez charged. The campaign is spearheaded by eight mostly Latino churches that are members of the St. Paul Ecumenical Alliance of Churches and Interfaith Action of Minneapolis. In the end, Aljets agreed to several requests and promised to work toward fulfilling others. But he said budget constraints precluded him from meeting many of the demands.

"Many of these things you recommended I support," Aljets told the group. "But some of the things I need more time than you have given me."

Organizers of the meeting felt it was a good first step.

"It's a beginning," Esilda Narvaez, co-chair of Interfaith Action. "We thought we would get more yeses, but for me it was very positive that he wanted to work with us."

The meeting was conducted with a fair amount of ritual and confrontation. Each demand was written in Spanish on a colored poster. As it was read, a child holding the poster stepped forward. Aljets was given two minutes to respond. Then the representative slapped a big sticker saying "No" or "Si" onto the poster.

Aljets said the federal agency, an arm of the U.S. Department of Justice, did not have money to hire a Spanish-speaking operator to answer simple questions over the phone. He said he could not install a public phone to receive

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incoming calls in detention cells because people picked up by the INS are often held in county or state jails. He noted, however, that people in detention can call out.

Aljets said he would not extend INS hours in the Bloomington headquarters past 3 p.m. to accommodate working people's schedules. He also would not distribute INS forms in public areas, such as libraries and social-service agencies.

But he did promise to provide INS forms to Latino activists if they wanted to set up their own distribution sites. Forms currently are available in the Bloomington office or can be ordered by phone. Aljets said that an INS service center to be opened later this summer in St. Paul will offer only limited services - such as fingerprinting for naturalization applications.

"We understand the logic of what you're asking for. We'll push for expanded services," he said. Aljets said the Bloomington district headquarters already provides Spanish translations of documents and a Spanish translator for people calling for information about relatives in detention. He also agreed to meet regularly with the coalition and agreed to recruit Spanish-speaking agents.

"We would welcome your assistance in locating bilingual applicants who wish to be employed by the INS," he said.

The sanctuary was packed with a mostly Latino audience. Another 100 or so mostly white and African-American supporters listened to simultaneous English translation through headphones from seats in the balcony.

SPEAC and Interfaith Action have emerged in recent years as powerful forces. Working through 50 member churches, the two organizations train community organizers to tackle community problems.

Last month, they successfully persuaded United Hospital to hire a full-time Spanish interpreter and to offer more bilingual services. They have also given out small business loans and convinced Cub Foods in the St. Paul's Midway neighborhood to offer managerial positions to area residents.

The INS campaign began when Latino leaders met eight months ago at a Minneapolis restaurant. They swapped stories about their INS problems and realized they had a galvanizing issue. Several leaders went to Milwaukee, where a similar coalition of church groups successfully negotiated changes in INS policy.

On March 16, several hundred people held a rally in St. Stephen Catholic Church in Minneapolis. Saturday was their first meeting since then.

#### Arrest numbers

Regional arrests of people suspected of being in America illegally have risen dramatically. Figures are for federal fiscal years, beginning Oct. 1, in the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service district made up by Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

1998- 876 (through March)

1997 - 1,626

1996 - 1,198

1995 - 1,202

1994 - 1,142

1993 - 1,013

1992 - 560

1991 - 514

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1990 - 405

Source: INS

## Graphic

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3 Photos: Pioneer Press Photos by Dawn Villella

1) Guillermo Rodriguez listens to testimony about how immigration policy is tearing apart immigrant families Saturday at First Lutheran

Church in St. Paul. The mostly Latino audience presented nine demands to regional INS director Curtis Aljets.

2) One of the demands is stamped with a "no" at the meeting

Saturday. Aljets agreed to several requests and promised to work toward fulfilling others.

3) Curtis Aljets, regional director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, speaks at a public meeting Saturday to

immigrant and Spanish-speaking families at First Lutheran Church in

St. Paul. Latino activists presented Aljets with nine demands they believe are needed to improve services for immigrant families.

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