

Activist holes up in church

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CHICAGO - An **activist** for illegal immigrants sought sanctuary in a **church** Wednesday rather than turn herself in for deportation, saying she fears being separated from her young son.

"I am a single mom. My son, he is a citizen," Elvira Arellano, a Mexican national, said from just inside the doorway of Adalberto United Methodist **Church**. "I am not a terrorist. I am not a criminal. I am a mom. He is my son."

Arellano, speaking through a translator Tuesday, said her 7-year-old son, Saul, worries that they will be separated.

"I want to stay here for my son. I want to give him a better future, a better life," she said.

Arellano, who was deported shortly after illegally crossing into the United States in 1997, is president of United Latino Family, which lobbies for families that could be split by deportation.

She says she returned within days, lived in Oregon for three years and moved to Chicago in 2000. She was arrested in 2002 at O'Hare International Airport, where she was employed as part of the janitorial staff, and subsequently convicted of working under a false Social Security number.

Arellano was ordered to appear at the immigration office in Chicago at 9 a.m. Tuesday, but instead went to the **church**.

Pastor Walter Coleman said his congregation offered Arellano refuge after praying about her plight. Coleman said he doesn't believe Arellano should have to choose between leaving her son behind or removing him from his home.

Federal officials declared Arellano a fugitive and said living inside a **church** does not offer her protection from arrest and deportation.

"There's nothing that prevents us from arresting anyone who has an outstanding deportation order anywhere in the United States," said Tim Counts, a spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"We will apprehend her at a time and place of our choosing," Counts said.

Legal experts agree that a **church** offers no formal protection, but they say it could put the government in an awkward position.

"Just because you are in a **church** doesn't mean you are less deportable in a legal sense," said Joel Fetzer, associate professor of political science at Pepperdine University. "But in a political sense, it looks very bad to be hauling people out of **churches** as the camera rolls."

Graphic

PHOTO

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