News



Participants at the "For Human Dignity" vigil/rally outside St. Anthony Catholic Church in Davenport, Iowa, May 1, 2024, hold placards protesting Iowa's new law that makes it a state crime for illegal reentry into Iowa. The vigil/rally was one of five events held in four Iowa cities on May 1, the feast day of St. Joseph the Worker. The new law — which is to take effect July 1 but is on hold pending court appeals — also gives Iowa judges and law enforcement officials the authority to determine whether someone should be deported. (OSV News/Barb Arland-Fye, The Catholic Messenger)

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Davenport, Iowa — May 7, 2024

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As many as 1,000 people participated in prayer vigils and rallies in four Iowa cities May 1 in support of human dignity and to call for the repeal of a new state law on illegal migration that opponents say is punitive.

On that same day, the feast of St. Joseph the Worker, Iowa's bishops issued a statement opposing the law and calling for a fair, compassionate resolution to challenges with migration.

The law, which takes effect July 1, is similar to a Texas law passed last year but is on hold pending court appeals.

In Iowa, Catholic parishes and the Iowa City Catholic Worker houses anchored the rallies and vigils in three of the four cities — Davenport, Iowa City and Waterloo. Organizers held the events simultaneously to oppose enactment of SF 2340, according to Quad Cities Interfaith, one of the organizing groups. Banners that proclaimed "For Human Dignity" and "Por La Dignidad Humana" in Spanish provided a visual link at each site.

Outside historic St. Anthony Catholic Church in downtown Davenport, adults and children of all ages spilled out from the front lawn to the sidewalks. Many held placards bearing hand-printed messages: "Does Iowa care????," "No Human Being Is Illegal," "Immigrants make the U.S. STRONGER!," "Today We March Tomorrow We Vote" and "No SF2340."

Senate File 2340, which Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, Republican, signed into law April 10, "makes it an aggravated misdemeanor for a person previously denied admission or deported from the U.S. to be in Iowa," the Iowa Catholic Conference said. "The bill does not allow police to make arrests on school property, church grounds or hospitals." It requires a judge, after a finding of probable cause for arrest, to order the person released and to leave the country.

Iowa's bishops and the Diocese of Davenport's diocesan administrator oppose measures such as SF 2340 "because they place a disproportionate emphasis on punitive sanctions, undermine family unity, reduce humanitarian protections, and provide no viable solutions for long-time residents without legal status. Nor can the State of Iowa simply 'remove' people to another sovereign nation without that country's permission," the Catholic leaders said in their statement.

They asked federal lawmakers to "resist easy answers and do their job," calling for border protection policies consistent with humanitarian values, which treat all individuals with respect, and that allow authorities to identify and prevent entry of terrorists and dangerous criminals. "As we remember our history as immigrants in Iowa, let us work together towards a fair and compassionate resolution of our challenges with migration," they said.

St. Anthony Church was "built by immigrant labor in 1837 to serve immigrants to Iowa," Father Rudolph Juarez, the parish's pastor said, alternating between English and Spanish in his talk. "The immigrants of 2024 share the same human dignity and deserve the same respect as the immigrants to Iowa in 1837 regardless of legal status."

He described SF 2340 as "disproportionately punitive in nature" and said it "does not provide any viable solutions for residents without legal status. The deputizing of state and local officials to prosecute individuals for state immigration crimes comes without funding for sufficient training of public officials and runs the risk of racial profiling and legal challenges." The interfaith speakers who followed him echoed his criticisms of the law.

"We stand together today with the immigrant community to call for meaningful immigration reform that identifies and prevents entry of terrorists and dangerous criminals but which protects human rights and dignity of all persons involved,"

Juarez said. "As voters and concerned citizens, we pledge to work for the common good with all people of good will to reform our laws, protect the most vulnerable among us, welcome the stranger and live in peace with all people."

Guitarists and singers led the gathering in songs interspersed in English and in Spanish between the talks.

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Daniel Salazar, state director of the League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, identified the vigil's three-fold purpose. The first point: to "send a clear message to elected officials and voters across Iowa that the Latino community, the immigrant community, and all its allies are present and paying attention." Second, "to affirm our commitment to collaboration with law enforcement and legislators to make fair, equal and equitable laws" regarding immigration legislation. Third, to call for repeal of Senate File 2340.

Salazar read a letter from Davenport Police Chief Jeffrey Bladel addressed to LULAC that underscored the police department's commitment to ensuring public safety for "all residents, regardless of immigration status." Bladel said the state has provided no guidance or direction regarding the law's implementation. He said the police department remains steadfast in upholding "policies that promote fairness and impartiality in our law enforcement practices."

Laney Gonzalez, a senior at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, said, "we will continue to demand what we have been asking of them for decades: comprehensive immigration reform. Without it, our homes and towns will become unwelcoming places for our neighbors, our friends, and our families."

Iowa City Mayor Bruce Teague participated in the Iowa City rally, which began outside the second of two Iowa City Catholic Worker houses. In a proclamation that he read to an estimated gathering of 250 people, he said Iowa City recognizes "the rich diversity of its residents, including immigrants from around the world who have chosen to call Iowa City home."

Immigrants "have played an integral role in shaping the cultural, economic, and

social fabric of Iowa City," Teague said, and play "an essential role in filling workforce gaps, driving innovation and sustaining economic growth in communities across our state."

In Waterloo, a demonstration and march to protest SF 2340 began in the parking lot of Queen of Peace Catholic Church. The pastor, Father Nils Jesús Hernández, said the event aimed to raise awareness about the adverse impact the new law would have on the immigrant community and to assure immigrants they are welcome and appreciated in Iowa, according to a news release.

Hernández, who was born in Nicaragua, urged the Waterloo City Council April 15 to make a statement of support "so we immigrant citizens can trust our civil leaders again."

Events held in Des Moines outside the state Capitol in a steady rain drew immigrants and others who believe the new law targets the Latino community, KCCI News 8 reported. The report included a clip from Reynolds. She said she had a responsibility to protect the health and safety of the state's citizens. In a news clip from The Gazette, she said, "Let's work with Congress; let's get an immigration bill passed."