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Catholic official among opponents of Penn. immigration bills

by Lou Baldwin by Catholic News Service

Immigration and the Church

PHILADELPHIA -- A series of bills introduced in the Pennsylvania Legislature this session as the "National Security Begins at Home Legislative Package" could harm citizens and legal permanent residents as well as undocumented immigrants, a Catholic official told legislators.

"Every human possesses inherent dignity, regardless of his or her immigration status," said Mark Shea, administrator of the immigration program of Philadelphia archdiocesan Catholic Social Services, at a hearing of the Committee on State Government of the House of Representatives Aug. 31 in Harrisburg.

He was testifying on behalf of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's Catholic bishops.

One proposed bill, H.B. 738, would make it a misdemeanor for a "person who is unlawfully present in the United States to knowingly apply for work, solicit work in a public place or perform work as an employee or independent contractor" in Pennsylvania.

"We object to any law that treats the actions of men and women to sustain themselves and their families through employment as criminal," Shea said. "(Under this bill) an undocumented immigrant may be allowed to stay in this country but will still not be able to sell hot dogs in Philadelphia to support his family," he added.

The same bill states that "a law enforcement officer, with or without a warrant, may arrest a person if the officer has probable cause to believe that the person has committed a public offense that makes the person removable from the United States."

"Such reckless, unconstrained local immigration enforcement will harm citizens and lawful permanent residents as well as undocumented immigrants," Shea said.

He criticized the legislation's stated policy of "attrition through enforcement," by which it becomes more difficult for undocumented immigrants to live and work in the United States because of better enforcement of existing laws.

Attrition through enforcement affects far more than the targeted individual, Shea said. For example, many children of the undocumented are in fact born in the United States and automatically become American citizens as guaranteed by the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. If the noncitizen parents are deported what happens to their citizen children?

"H.B. 857 limits state citizenship to those children born of at least one U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident parent," Shea said. "In doing so, Pennsylvania is making a very strong statement about who the state welcomes and values as members. In addition to blatantly contradicting the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, this bill also fails to give effect to the inherent dignity of every human being."

"A policy of 'attrition through enforcement' makes everyone, citizen and noncitizen, feel less safe," Shea said. "The fear of being detained or deported, of being taken away from children and families, makes victims as well as neighbors less likely to report crimes."

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Although Shea's oral presentation did not address positive steps the U.S. bishops would like to see in immigration legislation, the footnotes of the written text given to the legislators did.

In this, he quoted Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, former chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration: "The U.S. bishops' prescription ... is to bring the 11 million undocumented out of the shadows, register them with the government, require them to pay a fine and require them to learn English and work as they wait in the back of the line for a chance for citizenship."

Commenting on this, Shea said, "I think the church is looking for comprehensive immigration reform. They want to see the government provide a pathway for the folks here in the U.S.A. to gain legal residence, to provide an avenue for them to get a green card. What that does, five years down the road, they would be eligible to apply for citizenship, assuming they can establish good moral character, haven't picked up criminal convictions and support their children, etc."

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