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California forum attendees plead for immigration reform

by Monica Clark

"Congress people don't know the pain we carry every day for many years," Mireya Chavirria told Rep. Barbara Lee during an immigration forum Tuesday at St. Elizabeth High School in Oakland, Calif., part of the Democrat's 13th District.

Chavirria, who came to the United States with her husband and young son 16 years ago, said she cannot risk visiting her dying mother in Mexico because of her undocumented immigration status.

"Please share my story in Congress and be a voice for those of us here," she pleaded in front of more than 300 people from Oakland Community Organizations, labor unions and social service agencies working for immigration reform to create a direct path to citizenship.

Lee told the crowd, "Our immigration system is unfair and broken. Together, we will fix it."

The forum, attended by Hispanic, Asian, African and European immigrants, was one of several held throughout California as part of the Campaign for Citizenship, a project of PICO, the nation's largest faith-based organizing network.

PICO, founded by Jesuit Fr. John Baumann in 1972, has been a consistent advocate for overhaul of the U.S. immigration system. Its latest effort includes a five-point platform of essential elements for any immigration reform bill:

- The path to citizenship should be direct and not take longer than seven years.
- All 11 million undocumented immigrants should be given the right to legal residency and a process to citizenship that is free of unnecessary obstacles, such as high fees or prior arrest for being

undocumented.

- Persons approved for the initial phase of legal residency should be able to work, drive, attend school and travel out-of-country for family or educational purposes.
- The end of needless detentions and deportations of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who pose no danger to the community will result in significant financial savings to the government without risk to border security.
- Policies that increase the opportunity for immigrants to enter the U.S. legally will reunite families, prevent the exploitation of immigrant workers, and avoid creating a class of residents who cannot seek citizenship.

One of the most touching testimonies during the forum with Lee came from fourth-grade students at Jefferson Elementary School in Berkeley. With help from a parent, they have launched a campaign on behalf of classmate Rodrigo Guzman and his parents. The Guzmans were not allowed to return to Berkeley after a Christmas visit to relatives in Mexico because their visas had expired. They will have to wait five years to reapply. The "Bring Rodrigo Home" campaign is seeking intervention from Lee, Sen. Dianne Feinstein and President Barack Obama.

"In school, we are learning about all these important people, like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, who fought for people's civil rights and freedom," said student Kyle Kuwahara, reading from a letter he sent to Obama. "So what about Rodrigo's freedom? Who is fighting for his freedom? This is our time to stand up like Cesar Chavez, Yuri Kochiyama and Dolores Huerta to fight for Rodrigo's rights. We have to fight for Rodrigo's rights because he is not able to do it himself."

Other speakers addressed the constant fear that a husband or wife will be picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and deported, leaving a family without financial and emotional support.

"Too many families are suffering after having been separated from their loved ones," said Fr. Jesus Nieto-Ruiz, pastor of St. Anthony Church in Oakland and co-chair of Oakland Community Organizations, in a statement announcing the forum. Nieto-Ruiz, a naturalized citizen, was one of the clergy leaders invited to Las Vegas to hear Obama announce his plans for immigration reform.

A recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that almost 80 percent of Americans believe keeping families together and protecting the dignity of the human person are very important or extremely important principles that should guide immigration reform.

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The poll also found that majorities of all religious groups -- Hispanic Catholics (74 percent), Hispanic Protestants (74 percent), African-American Protestants (70 percent), Jewish Americans (67 percent), Mormons (63 percent), white Catholics (62 percent), white mainline Protestants (61 percent) and white evangelical Protestants (56 percent) -- agree that the immigration system should allow immigrants currently living in the U.S. illegally to become citizens provided they meet certain requirements.

Likewise, a recent Field Poll showed that 90 percent of California voters favor letting undocumented immigrants who have lived in the United States for a number of years remain in the country and move toward citizenship if they are employed, learn English and pay back taxes.

[Monica Clark is an *NCR* West Coast Correspondent. She writes from Oakland, Calif.]

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