

Advocates say tough new state laws make immigration reform more urgent

SALT LAKE CITY – The repressive immigration law passed last year by the Georgia General Assembly, which The New York Times called “one of the nation’s toughest,” was what brought Frank Mulcahy, executive director of the Georgia Catholic Conference, to Utah in mid-January.

He was one of 230 immigration advocates from 43 states gathered in Salt Lake City for three days of panels, workshops and networking. The Jan. 11-13 conference, “Immigration: A 50-State Issue,” was sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network.

“We want to see it changed,” Mulcahy said. In addition to causing the loss of millions of dollars in agricultural crops that have gone unharvested for lack of workers, the law “created a climate of fear,” he said. “Some parishes where we had heavy Hispanic attendance, we saw big drop-offs.”

Paul Long, president and CEO of the Michigan Catholic Conference, also attended the immigration conference to learn what has been done in other states “and how best we can tackle the issue should adverse immigration legislation be proposed and pushed in the Michigan Legislature,” he told the Intermountain Catholic, Salt Lake City’s diocesan newspaper.

Issues addressed in the panels and workshops included an overview of state immigration enforcement laws and covered topics such as how to communicate the Catholic bishops’ message on immigration through the media.

The most contentious panel was that with John Sandweg, special counselor to Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

Sandweg discussed DHS policies, how those policies are enforced and some changes that DHS has made to that enforcement.

“We inherited a broken set of immigration laws,” Sandweg said at the beginning of his presentation. “I know that might sound clichéd, but we all believe that.”

Although the system may be broken, DHS is nonetheless charged with enforcing the law; some discretion is allowed on how the law might be enforced, but there is no discretion on whether it is enforced, Sandweg said.

Over the past couple of years, DHS has changed its priorities from large-scale raids on workplaces to arresting undocumented people who are convicted criminals, those who have repeatedly violated immigration laws, those who are recently arrived and those who are fugitives from immigration courts, Sandweg said.

He acknowledged that DHS made mistakes with the way it introduced the ‘secure communities’ initiative, which allows the FBI to send to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) fingerprints that it has received from state agencies. ICE can then check the fingerprints against a national immigration database.

Sandweg defended secure communities as nothing more than an identification tool, but numerous immigration advocates have decried the potential for abuse of the system, including the possibility of racial profiling. As a result of the complaints that were received about the initiative, DHS formed a task force comprised of members of various law enforcement agencies, attorneys, labor union officials, academics, social service agency personnel and others.

The task force’s recommendations, which were submitted in September, are being reviewed, Sandweg said.

DHS policy is to focus on undocumented people who have committed felonies, Sandweg said, and each year more of those who are deported fall into this category. “We are making a difference; it is changing,” he said, but added that Congress must enact reform for other changes that Catholic advocates would like to see.

Sandweg fielded numerous questions and complaints about his department’s policies and actions. Kevin Appleby, director of migration policy and public affairs for the USCCB, said that was expected.

“DHS is the agency of the federal government that is responsible for a lot of these

enforcement actions that are impacting families and communities, and they need to be held accountable to the greatest extent possible as to how they go about that," Appleby said. "I think they got the message pretty clearly from all the participants that there is a lot of discord in the communities - a lot of injustices going on that need to be corrected."

The Utah Compact - an agreement signed by political, civic, business, religious, legal and law enforcement leaders that laid broad guidelines for how the immigration debate should be handled in Utah - was brought up several times as a model that could be used by other states.

The compact's principles are that there must be a federal solution to the immigration system; that law enforcement should concentrate its efforts on felons, not immigrants whose only crime is being undocumented; that families shouldn't be separated by the immigration system; that many businesses depend on immigrants; and that the U.S. is an inclusive, welcoming society.

"Here in Utah we used the compact as a firewall against harsh immigration enforcement proposals," said Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City in his keynote address at the conference's opening dinner.

Bishop Wester, who was chairman of the bishops' Committee on Migration from 2008-2010 and is now on the board of Catholic Relief Services, added that the Utah Legislature passed three immigration laws, only one of which was enforcement oriented.

"Similar compacts can be useful tools for advocacy but also are consistent with Catholic public policy based upon Catholic teaching," he said.

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