

Arizona bishops criticize bills increasing immigration enforcement

PHOENIX - The Catholic bishops of Arizona have expressed concern that new legislative proposals requiring greater enforcement of immigration laws by local police could harm public safety and separate families.

"Arizona would become the first state in the nation to codify its own 'illegal immigration' law by requiring persons who are here unlawfully in terms of federal law to be charged with trespassing under Arizona law," said the three bishops who make up the Arizona Catholic Conference in a March 8 statement.

The three are Bishops Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix, Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson and James S. Wall of Gallup, N.M., whose diocese includes parts of Arizona.

The bishops said S.B. 1070 and H.B. 2632 - identical bills currently before the Arizona Legislature - do not "clearly state that undocumented people who become victims of crimes can come forward without fear of deportation."

But they said it is "in all of our best interests" that no one be afraid to report a crime.

"Anything that may deter crimes from being reported or prosecuted will only keep dangerous criminals on the streets, making our communities less safe," the conference statement said.

The bishops said that although supporters of the bills say they are designed to allow local police to hold undocumented immigrants who are suspected of crimes, the proposals themselves do not "limit enforcement to persons suspected of criminal activity, thus leaving the possibility of criminalizing the presence of even children and young persons brought into our country by their parents."

"If enacted, these bills could lead to separation of family members that would not take place under current federal law," they added. "We believe it would be far better to withdraw these bills than to risk costly and unfairly punitive enforcement."

The Arizona bishops said immigration problems are complex and must be addressed in a comprehensive way at the national level.

“In the meantime, we are concerned that local legislation not create new problems for families or have a negative impact on public safety,” they said.

The bishops acknowledged that legislators faced “very difficult decisions” on other important issues, including a significant budget shortfall.

“We realize that there are no easy solutions to fixing either our economy or the budget, but we continue to ask that our representatives always keep in mind the most vulnerable among us – the unborn, children, the elderly and all who are struggling just to make ends meet.”

They thanked state legislators for their support of “measures to protect unborn children, to promote the protection of marriage as a foundational institution in our society and to expand educational opportunities for all children through school choice.”