

Baltimore educators to share Texas-Mexico border experience

Once two nuns and an associate of the School Sisters of Notre Dame returned to Baltimore after witnessing the immigration and border issues at the Texas-Mexico boundary last month, they learned the U.S. Senate failed to produce an immigration-reform bill.

Though discouraged that no bill was produced from the passionate debate over the controversial proposal to grant a legal process for many illegal aliens to live and work in this country legitimately, the educators on the religious order's Central American Committee are hopeful stronger legislation for immigration reform will make it through Congress in the near future.

"So many people saw this bill as an 'it's the best we can do proposal,'" said Sister Mary Ann Hartnett, S.S.N.D. "While we were in Texas, we kept hearing that it was better not to have any bill than a bad one. So, we're hoping the people in power will educate themselves about the reality of the problems. Then, go back to the drawing board and come up with legislation that will be compassionate to the honest and hardworking people who want a better life for their families."

Sister Mary Ann - joined by Sister Linda Stilling, S.S.N.D. and associate Mary Gunning - visited two Texas border towns where they observed the peaceful and productive coexistence of U.S. and Mexican citizens.

They returned with a resolve to share their experiences with Catholics throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore and to find a way for well-intended illegal immigrants to live in this country lawfully.

During the week in June they spent in the Texas towns of Laredo and Rio Grande City, and the Mexican municipality of Camargo, the women spoke with Texas legislators, school teachers, banking professionals, a mayor and a former member of the U.S. Border Patrol.

They were informed that so much attention is focused on border control that investigations into the serious drug trafficking situation in the region have taken a back seat.

"There is no doubt that there is a real criminal element crossing the borders," Sister Linda said. "But, most of the people who come into this country illegally are doing so

to create a better life for themselves and their families.”

Intense poverty, lack of employment opportunities, poor medical technology and substandard educational facilities have drawn citizens from Central American countries across U.S. borders and current immigration restrictions make it difficult at best to enter the country legally, said Ms. Gunning, who runs a Catholic Charities Head Start program at St. Jerome, Baltimore.

Most of these immigrants take jobs that U.S. business owners have a hard time filling with American workers, many of which are in the landscaping, restaurant, hotel and construction industries, Sister Linda said.

Opponents of immigration reform argue that granting millions of immigrants who entered the country illegally legal status is rewarding criminal behavior.

“I think when you look at the reasons why most of these people broke the law to come into our country, it’s a sin that should be forgiven,” Sister Mary Ann said.

“They are not taking jobs from American workers. They are filling a void.”