

Brochures inform Hispanic parishioners of legal rights

When parishioners of the Catholic Community of St. Michael/St. Patrick, Fells Point, opened their May church bulletins, inside they found a brochure informing immigrants how to legally protect themselves if they are detained.

In a faith community where some 80 percent of parishioners are Latino immigrants, here legally and illegally – the English/Spanish written brochure is a vital tool, said Maritza Morales, secretary of St. Michael and St. Patrick.

“Everyone who comes to Mass gets a bulletin, so we stuffed them inside of the bulletin to make sure they got a brochure,” Ms. Morales said. “This is very important information for our parishioners. I hope they will read it and that it’s helpful to them.”

Though the brochure – produced by CASA of Maryland – had been in the works for more than a year, production was hastened after immigration officers raided several Baltimore City job sites earlier this year and arrested numerous immigrants suspected of being in this country illegally, said Liza Zamd, an attorney for the immigrant-rights organization.

“A lot of immigrants are not educated about how the system works in this country and it’s important they know what rights they have,” Ms. Zamd said. “In their home country they don’t have these rights and don’t always know any better.”

The double-sided-seven-page brochure lists several dos and don’ts for immigrants – regardless of their legal status – if they are detained by law enforcement officers, she said.

“For instance, this tells them not to sign any documents that they don’t fully understand,” Ms. Zamd said. “This can be a problem if they don’t know the language very well. In those cases they should wait to have an attorney read it and the contents are made clear to them in their own language.”

The brochure also emphasizes they have the right to remain silent and don't have to speak with law enforcement officers without the presence of an attorney, she said. Immigrants are also cautioned to keep copies of their legal documents with them at all times, in case they are detained, and to keep a back-up copy - if possible - in a safe place.

They should also have an emergency plan in place in case they are detained by law enforcement, to have someone pick up their children and to have a telephone number of an immigration attorney in their possession, Ms. Zamd said.

"The information in this is applicable for people who are legal and for people who are not legal residents of this country," she said. "It's important that we educate everyone, immigrants and non immigrants, about their fundamental rights."

In addition to churches with large Latino populations, the ACLU has also requested brochures, Ms. Zamd said.

Applauding the dissemination of legal information to the Hispanic population, Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, said the effort should help protect some of the more vulnerable residents in the city.