

# Immigrant advocates say makeup of new Congress will make reform tough

SCHILLER PARK, Ill. – The effort to enact a comprehensive reform of immigration law is going to be a whole lot harder with the new Congress, according to panelists at a national Justice for Immigrants gathering in Schiller Park Nov. 3-8.

For the next two years, the best immigration bill might be no bill at all, said Stuart Anderson of the National Foundation for American Policy, speaking on a panel titled “A Pro-Immigration Agenda for the 112th Congress.”

More than 200 immigration advocates from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, dioceses across the country and the People Improving Communities Through Organizing network, known as PICO, gathered to talk about immigration, church teaching and how Catholics can best advocate for reform.

Father Cletus Kiley, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, said that Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles recently told a group of immigration rights advocates from organized labor that it will be a tough go in the next few years. Father Kiley serves as the immigration director of UNITE-HERE, a union that represents hotel and restaurant workers, among others.

“It’s probably going to be a long time before we have anything we could call comprehensive immigration reform,” Father Kiley said. “The cardinal said keeping the conversation going would be about the best we could do.”

Elena Segura, director of the Office for Immigrant Affairs and Education in the Archdiocese of Chicago, spoke about her office’s efforts to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform, especially in parishes that are predominantly non-Latino, and to train immigrants to minister to one another through the office’s Pastoral Migratoria ministry, which is active in 55 Latino parishes and five Polish parishes.

When asked how she responds to people who question the church's assistance to people who are in the United States illegally, she said she goes back to the basics of the faith.

"As a new Catholic, I start with the Scriptures and with Pope John Paul II and especially 'Ecclesia in America,'" said Segura, who became Catholic in 2005. She was referring to the pope's apostolic exhortation on the 1997 Synod of Bishops for America.

"In the Eucharist, who is the host? Jesus is the host, and we are the guests. When we leave Mass, we are sent to be the host for the other - any other," Segura added.

She also shares her experiences at Friday morning prayer services outside the Broadview Immigrant Detention Center in the Chicago area, where people are processed for deportation.

She and other Catholics pray with family members outside the gates, and in her experience, at least 80 percent of the deportees have committed no crime except being in the country without permission. They are not dangerous, she said.

"They come to work, and they come to be with their families," she said.

The conference attendees, who came from 75 U.S. dioceses in 34 states, also heard messages of optimism: Latinos are the fastest growing voting group in the country, and they tend to care about immigration.

"You can't demonize this very community you're going to need. ... The Republicans are sitting on a demographic time bomb that is going to explode under them," said Angela Kelly of the Center for American Progress, speaking on the same issue. "We want you to be lighting the match."

Democratic legislators are under similar pressure, Kelly said, noting that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada spent a lot of time in the weeks leading up to the election talking about the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, or DREAM Act. The bill that would provide a chance for legal status and eventual citizenship for young people who were brought into the United States illegally as children and educated here or who serve in the military here. Reid won

re-election by a narrow margin but had a large majority of Latino votes.

But the issue weighs more heavily on the right side of the aisle, because nothing will get done without Republican votes, even in the upcoming lame duck session, she said.

Maria Odom of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, who was on the same panel, said there are things the government can do to improve the situation of immigrants without passing any new laws.

Some common sense measures would include people who are in the United States with “temporary protected status” to adjust their immigration status without returning to their countries of origin and expanding “parole in place,” which allows people seeking to regularize their status to do so in the United States, for dependents of people in the U.S. military and the same young people who would be helped by the DREAM Act.