

# Immigrant advocates want to see a change

WASHINGTON - After the failure last year of a bill that seemed so close to passing that people started planning how to implement it, supporters of comprehensive immigration reform are regrouping, preparing to take on their opponents who have been dominating public debate on the issue.

Frank Sharry, a leader of the comprehensive reform movement and longtime director of the National Immigration Forum, is leaving that organization to launch a new one, America's Voice, with the goal of "taking off the gloves" in responding to opponents of comprehensive reform.

"There is a concerted effort by the opponents of immigration to demonize immigrants," Sharry said at the annual gathering of Catholic social ministry workers in Washington in late February. "They use talk radio and distorted facts. Those who demonize don't have the facts, but they have had the upper hand in the debate."

One oft-cited claim by those who want more restrictions on immigration, that immigrants are responsible for rising crime, was refuted by new reports by the Public Policy Institute of California and the Immigration Policy Center in Washington.

The California study found that although people born outside the United States account for 35 percent of the state's adult population, immigrants make up only 17 percent of the prison population. Even among those most likely to be convicted of crimes, men ages 18-40, U.S. natives were 10 times more likely than immigrants to be jailed, it found.

But the national debate about immigration of recent years has been framed as a question of either/or, Sharry said. For example, some say either one supports "the rule of law" and believes anyone in the country illegally should be prosecuted, or one must support lawbreaking.

"The current system respects neither the rule of law nor the right of families to seek

improvement in their lives,” he said. “It’s about time we had an immigration system that embodies both traditions, upholding the law and the right to seek better opportunities – (which is) a human right, not a legal right.”

“The Catholic Church has been so prophetic in taking on this issue,” Sharry said, noting that the church has a 2,000-year perspective on migration, which it views as a fundamental right of people who wish to improve their lives.

Sharry’s new role will in part be to fight back at arguments such as the Mexican border with the U.S. must be walled off and deportations escalated before any other steps are taken to deal with immigration problems, including years-long waits to immigrate legally and the lack of any legal immigration option for most people.

Supporters of a broader approach to immigration reform include the U.S. Catholic bishops, other churches’ governing bodies, labor unions, and business, ethnic and civil rights organizations.

They want a bill that includes a process to legalize the estimated 12 million people here illegally, offers more visas for unskilled laborers and streamlines the system for reuniting families at the same time enforcement is improved.

One target of Sharry’s work – cited in materials provided to the Catholic social ministry workers at the Feb. 26 session – is the glib sound bites focused on lawbreaking and stirring fears that have set the tone for the national immigration debate, despite poll after poll that shows most Americans support a broad-based approach to immigration problems.

A handout provided at the session offered detailed responses to a dozen of the most common assertions that have dominated immigration discussions.

Among the hot-button assertions that get broad play especially on radio and television are: “What part of illegal don’t you understand?” “They’re violating the rule of law.” “They’re taking jobs from citizens and driving down wages.” “My grandparents came legally; they should too.” “They need to get in line and play by the rules.” “They’re a drain on the economy and don’t pay taxes.”

Kevin Appleby, director of immigration and refugee policy for the U.S. Conference of

Catholic Bishops, told the social ministry gathering that “one disadvantage we have is that (opponents of comprehensive reform) can make these statements in five seconds and it takes us 30 or 40 seconds to explain our side.”

Appleby said the reason comprehensive immigration legislation failed in 2007 “was not because of our strategy in Washington, but because we could not create enough grass-roots support to support our representatives in Congress.”

Majorities in both the House and Senate understood the complexities of the issue and “were willing to do the right thing, but they were overwhelmed by an organization that beat us 10-to-1 in letters to Congress.”

Despite the fact polls showed much more support for comprehensive immigration legislation than for enforcement-only alternatives, Appleby said, “that didn’t motivate people to act. Fear was the better motivator.”

One by one, Appleby refuted some of the most common arguments, such as the claim that undocumented immigrants are a drain on public resources.

“If that was the truth we’d have a much different economy,” Appleby said. Even those in the country without permission pay sales and property taxes and pay taxes as part of their rent, he noted.

Many pay into the Social Security system, he said, accounting for as much as \$7 billion a year in Social Security and Medicare taxes, though those wage-earners will never be able to collect what they paid.