

Education, health care among challenges listed at Dallas conference on illegal immigration

Dallas: Health care, education among issues addressed at conference

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Some 200 people -- including the Dallas schools superintendent and Parkland Memorial Hospital officials -- turned out Thursday for a frank and detailed discussion on illegal immigration and some of the challenges the city faces.

The conference -- Nation of Immigrants: 21st Century Challenges -- was sponsored by the Dallas chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women and included diverse sessions on medical care, legal and civil rights, and education in Dallas and the state.

About 1.6 million illegal immigrants are estimated to live in Texas and nearly 12 million in the nation, as of 2006, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

Michael Hinojosa, an immigrant and superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District, helped kick off a plenary session with a story about "courage."

He told participants of a school superintendent in the Panhandle who saw the drama of an immigration raid unfolding at Swift & Co. slaughterhouse in the Panhandle.

He drove back to the district and told his teachers not to let students leave at the end of the school day for fear their parents wouldn't be home, the Dallas superintendent recounted.

"The school superintendent had the courage to do what was right," Dr. Hinojosa said.

He then talked about the particular challenges that the DISD faces with about a third of its students being of limited English proficiency, or LEP. Of that amount, "at least 15,000 are undocumented," he said, adding that it is district policy not to ask students their legal status.

The educator also talked about his frustration in trying to hire fully bilingual teachers. Many potential teachers have graduated from four-year universities with bilingual education degrees but are themselves without legal immigration status.

"We have the greatest labor force here," Dr. Hinojosa said.

In a session on health care, Dr. Donna Persaud, medical director of pediatrics at Parkland, noted that the hospital is not allowed by law to discriminate against those who might not have legal immigration status.

But she said medical officials have found some surprises among Latino patients -- many of them believed to be immigrants.

For instance, many have "very high" pediatric vaccination rates, believed to be rooted in a Mexican health system also with high vaccination rates, she said.

"They are always trying to do things right, and they never want to get into trouble," Dr. Persaud said.

Jennifer Cutrer, Parkland's executive director of legislative affairs, said the hospital likes to focus on the care.

"You don't want to sort people out in an emergency room," she said.

In 2007, the hospital provided \$512 million in uncompensated care, according to a slide show presentation by Ms. Cutrer.

Doris Meissner, a former chief of the federal immigration agency, gave the keynote speech and talked about an aging U.S. population and the lack of native-born workers to supply labor-force growth.

"It is not a question of work people will not do," said Ms. Meissner, now a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. People can be paid enough to do almost any job, she said.

The conference ended with strategy sessions that included a possible focus for a Dallas Office of Immigrant Affairs -- which participants suggested could include education on "the benefit of hybridization of cultures"; legal services; and a venue that's a "trusted source of information."

Leaders of the Council of Jewish Women said they expect to prepare a report on the proposals from participants.