



**Testimony of Nicholas Torres, President of Congreso de Latinos Unidos  
Before the State House Republican Policy Committee  
Philadelphia, PA  
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Good morning, my name is Nicholas Torres, and I serve as the President of Congreso de Latinos Unidos, the largest community-based, Latino social services agency in Pennsylvania, located in Philadelphia. On behalf of the 24,000 clients we directly serve at Congreso, our staff, and our board of directors, it is a privilege to be here before you today to reflect on the impact that immigration has had in our state, not only during the recent Latino immigration wave, but since our founding fathers themselves decided to come here seeking similar freedom. Congreso is committed to protecting civil rights, welcoming newcomers and empowering immigrant residents as a matter of conviction in addressing the issues that affect the community we serve.

Congreso's mission is to *strengthen Latino communities through social, economic, education, and health services; leadership development; and advocacy*. The agency currently employs over 300 bilingual and multicultural employees. Additionally we are an active member of a coalition of 18 other organizations in Philadelphia that serve majority Latino residents in Eastern North Philadelphia.

Today's testimony will clarify two primary points. First, the bills and activity surrounding proposed state immigration legislation are creating anti-Latino sentiment, discrimination and racism at a time when Latinos and other immigrant populations are actually improving Pennsylvania's economy. Second, the current state immigration legislation, especially HB1959 (English-only legislation), discriminates against legal immigrants. Throughout this debate, Congreso implores the state to look at fair and reasonable solutions to the complexities of immigration reform – solutions that we can reach together and solutions that can influence federal immigration reform.

First, let me lay the landscape on the Latino population. According to a 2004 US Census survey, 3.8% of Pennsylvanians are of Hispanic origin. Philadelphia's estimate is quite higher, with approximately 11% of Latino residents living in the city. Surrounding cities exceed all estimates with populations reaching between 30-50%. Since Congreso's inception

in 1977, the Latino population in Philadelphia has increased by over 55% with current population estimates now placed at approximately 150,000. It is roughly estimated that there are approximately 10,000 to 12,000 undocumented Latinos in Philadelphia. While the majority of the Latino population in the City is of Puerto Rican origin (77%), there is a growing diversity which includes individuals from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico, among other nations. To address the needs of this growing population, in 2002, Congreso began expanding its services to the South Philadelphia region of the city to provide the emerging Mexican community with critical social, legal, economic, and educational resources; with the final objective being an integration of this group into the city and community fabric.

The recent immigration debate is partially fueled by misconceptions on which proposed legislation is based. First, there has been a popular misconception that undocumented immigrants are responsible for a spike in crime; however, no data has been provided to support such claim. In fact, Philadelphia Police Commissioner Johnson and New York's Mayor Bloomberg dispelled that myth in their testimony here on July 5<sup>th</sup>. Commissioner Johnson attested that less than 1% of homicides in the city are perpetrated by undocumented residents. His focus, instead, was on the need to engender the trust of all immigrants in order to ensure the public safety of all residents. Isolated cases such as the one in the City of Hazelton have been used to mislead Pennsylvania citizens into generally believing that immigrants, regardless of documentation status, are of a criminal nature, when in fact, immigrants have been very positive contributors to our state.

Another popular misconception is that undocumented immigrants are a drain on public services and resources. Any costs to undocumented immigrants are far outweighed by the contributions they put into the system. The Social Security Administration holds approximately \$420 billion from the earnings of immigrants who are not eligible to claim benefits and yet undocumented immigrants are ineligible for the vast majority of state and federal benefits.

Latinos and other immigrant groups, as you have heard in previous testimony today, yesterday and last week, are contributing in many positive ways to Pennsylvania's growth and vitality. Pennsylvania has an aging and slow-growing population and a workforce that cannot sustain growth. Immigrants have countered the steady population loss Pennsylvania has witnessed over the last 50 years. There is a current worker gap, as there is not enough

unskilled labor in the state to meet current demands. This point was eloquently made in the U. S. Senate public hearing in this same building on July 5<sup>th</sup>, by representatives from multiple industries, including: agriculture, hotel & tourism, healthcare and landscaping. Immigrants, whether documented or not, provide much needed labor that sustains our economy. 90% of new job growth from 1996-2000 in Pennsylvania was due to immigrants. In 2002, Hispanic businesses grew to 6,399 in Pennsylvania, from which \$1.4 billion worth of sales resulted. Latinos are imperative to Philadelphia's growth in service industries. They have greatly contributed to the revitalization of our urban areas in the industries such as the burgeoning restaurant boom and the rapidly growing construction industry. Additionally, Latinos have contributed to the richness and diversity of cultural resources, and Philadelphia in particular is increasingly seen as a cosmopolitan, attractive city because of it.

To attract more residents, whether immigrant or not, Pennsylvania needs to be perceived as a welcoming state. Legislation focused on criminalizing undocumented workers, denying them public benefits, and restricting communication within our communities only causes widespread disruption, displacement, and upheaval that would have negative ripples throughout state economy. Demographics are shifting; Latinos are now the majority minority in 27 states. The Hispanic population is now the largest minority group in the country. In addition to the 3.9 million Puerto Rican residents in the US, Hispanics make up 14% of the nation's population. Pennsylvania needs to embrace these facts to remain economically and socio-politically vibrant. Latinos are part of Pennsylvania's solution to an aging population with a declining birth rate. Let's not fail to see the power Latino numbers add to our state.

The reactions to changing demographics in the state as embodied in the package of proposed Pennsylvania immigration legislation is not only short-sighted and narrow-minded, but will have negative effects on all Hispanics in the state. Let us focus specifically on how HB1959 – what is known as the “English-only bill” - negatively affects the Hispanic population.

The English-only legislation proposed in HB1959 has far reaching implications for not only undocumented immigrants, but for immigrants who are here legally and for citizens like Puerto Ricans. One question we need to ask is how Pennsylvania can implement such legislation when Puerto Rico's official language is Spanish? The support for this legislation is misguided, as there is an assumption that it saves state dollars and encourages non-native

speakers to learn English. As the desire to learn English is already present, we simply need to increase funding to serve those who want and need to learn the language. How much money is our state willing to invest to make sure that Puerto Ricans and other non-native English speakers would learn English before moving to Pennsylvania? The demand is there; it's the supply that is lacking. Congreso can attest to the vigor and dedication that our clients make in learning our complex language. Many older, first generation immigrants will struggle with learning a second language, even on a conversant level. As some of us who try to fluently speak, read and write a 2<sup>nd</sup> language can attest, studies show that it takes seven years for an adult to learn a foreign language. Learning to read a second language is even more difficult, especially for those with limited formal education. So they need more opportunities, not less, to actually learn the language.

Even without strong governmental support for English language classes, immigrants have demonstrated their motivation in learning English. Consider the following facts: Nearly four in ten (39.5%) first-generation immigrant children are limited-English-proficient, compared with two in ten (20.9%) second-generation children and less than one in ten (0.5%) third-generation children. The decline in the percentage of immigrant students who are Limited English Proficient is even sharper for Latinos. For example, among Mexican immigrant children, 55.3% of the first generation, 35.7% of the second generation, and only 4.9% of the third generation are Limited English Proficient.

English is the language of commerce, business and social activity; immigrants understand that. **To generate more English speakers, we need to increase funding to serve those who want and need to learn the language. Again, the demand is there; it's the supply that is lacking.** By limiting all government forms and communications to English, we disenfranchise documented and undocumented residents and citizens. Doing so only puts a drain on city and state government through increasing the work. A more efficient strategy to enforcing English-only legislation is to formulate a plan to provide access to affordable English classes, meeting the current demand of residents.

English-only and other anti-immigrant legislation and sentiment in Pennsylvania and around the country have led to racial profiling, discrimination, populist backlash, and in some cases, state-sanctioned racism. This is eerily reminiscent of the discrimination of African Americans in the 60's and the Japanese in the 40s. We learn from our history so that we don't repeat it. The results of the recent 2006 National Survey of Latinos conducted by

the Pew Hispanic Center shows that more than half of Latinos surveyed say they see an increase in discrimination as a result of this year's policy debate. Latinos are feeling more discrimination in their everyday lives. One poignant example of this was clear on July 13, 2006 in Hazleton, PA. Members of Congreso's staff and other Philadelphia Latino leaders went to Hazleton to lay witness to the polarization that ensued as a result of the recent passage of the "Illegal Immigrant Relief Act". On the front of the City Hall steps, you saw Latino supporters on one side, and the Mayor's supporters on the other. Other than a few Anglo clergy and immigration supporters, the skin color on the two sides of the street were very distinguishable; thereby demonstrating how easy it is to unfairly target Latinos or other minorities of color for unfair enforcement of laws that supposedly target only a small subgroup of this population. After the ordinance passed, our group ate at a new, local Dominican restaurant. The owner was very proud to bring his homeland's cuisine to this quaint town. This restaurant employs community residents and adds to the vibrancy of the main street of Hazleton. Within one week of this store's opening, someone drove by and threw a rock through the front window. This was ethnically motivated and now has the staff and owner of the restaurant feeling insecure at the restaurant and in the community. This type of reactionism does and will affect the population of this city and of this business owner, whose motivation in opening this restaurant was simply to provide a secure future for his family.

This Dominican family is living in Hazleton as legal residents. Many others are as well. But anti-immigrant legislation and sentiment are penalizing more than just the undocumented population. They are also affecting legal families, mixed-status families, and families who are here as citizens and also happen to be Latino. It is important to state that documentation required to immigrate, backlogs of over six years, and the restrictions on visas have all contributed to this phenomenon of undocumented workers. It is a system that is much more cumbersome than the one in place during our grandparent's generation.

In the US, there are only 5,000 visas available for unskilled workers seeking year-round work, yet there are 485,000 who come seeking the same. We have to remember as well that many families currently living in the US and in Pennsylvania have mixed immigration status, and this is true in the Latino community. Enforcement-only provisions would split-up families and work against family unity. The security of children is hindered when parents are deported. Children and spouses are left behind in their home countries

because the wait list for coming to the United States is longer than six years. We don't want to drive hard-workers deeper underground, we don't want them to be afraid to cooperate with police, and we certainly don't promote state sanctions that lead to increased victimization.

The economic, social, and moral implications of the state's attempts to resolve the complex issues involved in comprehensive immigration reform will give rise to widespread confusion, inconsistencies, administrative burden, illogical results, and wasteful litigation that will only further complicate and prolong true federal comprehensive immigration reform.

Rather than go down this path, Congreso proposes that the State work as a partner in coordinated efforts with various community and faith-based organizations that are already working to influence federal immigration reform. Pennsylvania needs to look at provisions that are reasonable and fair; that are enforceable and that protect our residents. We urge you to cooperate with the federal government on comprehensive immigration reform; reform that addresses real solutions for the population of 12 million residents in this country. Deporting and/or criminalizing people who are essential to our economy is not the answer. Dislocation is unwieldy and mostly unenforceable on a state level. Oppressive laws discriminate against immigrant populations, which therefore work against Pennsylvania. We need to remember that the system is broken; it's not the immigrants who are. We need immigrant workers to keep our economy strong. And we need a diverse populace to keep our society vibrant.

Together we can help revitalize Pennsylvania's economy by capitalizing on the influx of immigrants as we prepare Pennsylvania for the future. State efforts and resources are much more wisely spent on programs promoting the use of English as a Second Language, citizenship classes, job training, proper education for our youth, and small business development. The State benefits from these investments with a more educated and prepared workforce. With more and stronger businesses, such as those that are Latino-owned, the State is more readily able to compete in the national and global landscape. America started here in Philadelphia; it is an honor for all of us here today to stand in a room inspired by the same reasons that lead our founding fathers to seek "the pursuit of happiness." Let's not change Pennsylvania's heritage with disdain and cowardice, but with the just powers that affect "our safety and happiness" and that provide new guards for our "future security."

Sources include:

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