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Arizona's Example is Not One To Follow

Faith Advocates Call for Federal Action on Comprehensive Immigration Reform

WASHINGTON, DC- The Interfaith Immigration Coalition condemns the passage of Arizona's SB1070 and recent attempts of other states to take control of immigration law enforcement. The Arizona law, and others like it, would criminalize undocumented immigrants and require police officers to interrogate and arrest those who they "reasonably suspect" to be undocumented.

Fear-based state legislation meant to curb illegal immigration does nothing to make our borders or communities safe or address the fundamental flaws in our nation's immigration system. We acknowledge that the immigration system is broken and it must be fixed soon. But until Congress acts, states will continue to take immigration policy into their own hands.

People of faith must stand up against state legislation meant to divide our communities, and stand up for practical solutions that reflect our values of fairness, equal protection under the law, and the dignity of every person. President Obama and members of Congress must lead efforts to unite lawmakers around common sense principles for comprehensive immigration reform.

(The following are various statements from member organizations of the Interfaith Immigration Coalition)

From Joe Volk, Executive Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation:

"Arizona's new immigration law is dangerous. It pushes a nativist button that has, in the past, led to violence against immigrants. The real problem, though, is Congress. The Arizona law came out of the anger and fear created by the failure of Congress to fix the broken U.S. immigration system. It is just the most recent and egregious example of state and local governments "stepping in" to enforce immigration laws.

Now, more states are deciding to follow Arizona's path toward a reactionary state in which we all have to "carry papers" to prove our legitimate status. Minnesota lawmakers have introduced legislation modeled on the unconstitutional Arizona law, and eleven other states are considering similar legislation – Arkansas, Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas and Utah.

Lawmakers should not start by assuming that a group of people are the problem. Immigrants who would utilize the legal system are prevented

from doing so, because the current system is inefficient and outdated. Then, immigrants – and not the broken immigration laws – are perceived as the problem and punished. History has taught us that when people are named as the problem, then bad laws and conduct follow, often leading to violence, killings, and sometimes even mass atrocities.

We need decisive action at the federal level that upholds our highest values and reforms the broken immigration system in order to respect the dignity of everyone. Without such action, our human and civil rights will continue to be trampled.”

From Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism:

“This inhumane and retrogressive bill virtually invites racial and ethnic profiling by broadly defining reasonable suspicion of undocumented status as grounds for questioning by police officers. Allowing an individual’s accent or skin color to precipitate an investigation into his or her legal status is an anathema to American values of justice and our historic status as a nation of immigrants. The bill is also likely to endanger our communities by discouraging immigrants from cooperating with law enforcement on issues of national security.

Over the centuries, Jews have so often known the experience of being “strangers in strange lands.” The plight of the non-citizen resonates for us. This bill is an affront to America’s history as a land welcoming to immigrants who have sought not only freedom, but the opportunity to contribute to and strengthen our nation.”

From the Episcopal Church, Office of Government Relations:

“The Episcopal Church, in its commitment to render hospitality to those who are most vulnerable, calls on the United States Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform. The passage in Arizona of the toughest anti-immigrant law in the country demonstrates the need for action at the federal level. **In an open letter last Friday the Bishop of Arizona, the Rt. Rev. Kirk Smith, expressed that “today is a sad day in the struggle to see all God's people treated in a humane and compassionate manner (...) With the Governor's signing of SB 1070, it seems that for now the advocates of fear and hatred have won over those of charity and love. Arizona claims to be a Golden Rule State. We have not lived up to that claim.”**

The lack of fair and humane immigration reform opens the door to misguided and divisive state and local attempts to address immigration enforcement. We urge Congress to provide a solution to a broken immigration system that separates families, spreads fear and keeps millions living in the shadows. Every day, members of our congregations see the unacceptable consequences of our broken immigration system. We urge the Senate and House to enact bipartisan immigration reform that reunites families, protects the rights of all workers, and provides an opportunity for undocumented immigrants to earn legal status.”

From Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service:

“Unless Congress immediately acts, states will continue to take immigration policy into their own hands. On April 23, Arizona signed into law legislation that would place

immigrants and U.S. citizens at risk of being interrogated, arrested or even jailed if local police have “reasonable suspicion” about their immigration status. **Rev. Gale Schmidt, a Lutheran pastor in Phoenix, Arizona, is concerned about the impact of the new state law. Even before the bill was signed into law, he noted that U.S. citizens were being hand-cuffed and jailed simply because they looked Latino and were not carrying their birth certificates with them. “Something needs to be done about fixing the immigration system, but don’t criminalize immigrants, demean people, and offend our Latino citizens. There is a better way.”** To date, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and other states are considering similar initiatives.

LIRS, like many people in the United States, is frustrated by the lack of movement on comprehensive immigration reform and recognizes the significant challenges states face in confronting the broken immigration system. However, instead of creating a patchwork of state laws, Congress and the administration must make comprehensive immigration reform a priority. Rev. Carlos Hernandez, Director of Districts and Congregations of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, added, “Compelled by our biblical faith, we are praying for immigration reform that makes us a safer and more secure nation, but that also safeguards the dignity of human beings as Scripture tells us to do.”

From Gideon Aronoff, President and CEO, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society:

“Like Governor Brewer, HIAS is frustrated with the inaction in Washington and the resulting impact on local communities across the country. Yet unlike the governor, we believe that our value system as Americans and as Jews, which protects human dignity above all else, must never be jeopardized.

For Jews especially, the question “Where are your papers” raises the dual specters of Nazi Europe and the Soviet Union. Within living memory, some of us were forced to identify ourselves by yellow stars and many of us by having “Yevrey” (“Jew” in Russian) stamped on our identification papers.

The situation in Arizona, though very different from these tragic memories, nevertheless resonates strongly.

Once it takes effect later this year, the Immigration; Law Enforcement; Safe Neighborhoods Act (SB 1070) will require everyone in the state of Arizona to carry government-issued identification at all times or risk arrest. Despite the police training programs Governor Brewer mandated after the law was signed to prevent racial profiling, discrimination seems unavoidable.

For legal residents who will be pulled over based solely on the color of their skin or questioned due to their accents, the reaction no doubt will alternate between shame and rage. This legislation will pit segments of society against each other, resulting in increased hate rhetoric and racial tension.”

From the American Jewish Committee:

“AJC has condemned Arizona’s new immigration law, calling it ‘a setback in national efforts to achieve immigration reform.’ The Arizona law, expected to go into effect this summer, will allow local law enforcement to stop anyone, if there is reason to suspect they are illegal immigrants, and arrest those unable to produce proper immigration documents.

‘We regret Gov. Brewer’s decision to sign this misguided law,’ said Richard Foltin, AJC’s Director of National and Legislative Affairs. ‘This law essentially allows police to question and arrest people on little more than suspicion. It will encourage racial profiling, fear of police and further distrust in a community already wary of law enforcement.’

AJC’s Arizona Regional Office had advocated against passage of the bill by the state legislature. AJC joined with other national and Arizona religious leaders in letters encouraging the Governor to veto the bill.

‘Regrettably, this law impedes the progress made by Arizona law enforcement in reaching out to immigrant communities,’ said Foltin. ‘It underscores the need for comprehensive immigration reform at the national level, to create an effective federal immigration system characterized by the rule of law and the humane treatment of immigrants.’

From the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas:

“As Sisters of Mercy we are committed to stand in solidarity with immigrants seeking fullness of life. For 167 years, we have served and continue to serve immigrant communities, and to advocate on behalf of immigrants held in detention.

Immigration is a complex issue which has its roots in economic policies that force people to leave their home countries in search of employment to support their families. Criminalizing infractions of immigration law does not address the root causes of human migration and leads instead to serious human rights violations.”

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About the Interfaith Immigration Coalition:

The Interfaith Immigration Coalition (IIC) is a partnership of faith-based organizations committed to enacting comprehensive immigration reform that reflects our mandate to welcome the stranger and treat all human beings with dignity and respect.

For more information about the IIC and a list of member organizations, visit www.interfaithimmigration.org