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Kim Hill

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Speaker Discusses Human Cost of Immigration Policy

Sept. 13, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The human cost of a flawed immigration system was the focus of a presentation Tuesday, Sept. 11, at Illinois Wesleyan University.

"Making Human Rights Real: Immigration Policy and Immigrant Rights" was held as part of IWU's yearlong promotion of a greater understanding of human rights issues. The presenter, Jennifer J. Carrillo, of Latinos United for Change and a community organizer at Illinois People's Action, was also formerly an undocumented immigrant who moved to the United States with her family at the age of 10.

Carrillo spoke to more than 100 students enrolled in classes that are part of the Making Human Rights Real cluster of courses offered this semester. Students in the eight courses will participate in a number of joint events to facilitate shared perspectives across disciplines.



Jennifer J. Carrillo

Carrillo contends consequences from the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA), which took effect in 1994, "has fueled a large exodus of Mexicans to the U.S." As a result of NAFTA, Carrillo said, U.S. companies have constructed *maquiladoras* in the free-trade zone along the Mexican border. *Maquiladoras* are factories that take in imported raw materials and produce goods for export.

Another effect of NAFTA has been U.S.-subsidized agribusinesses flooding the Mexican market, according to Carrillo, resulting in Mexican corn producers who cannot compete against the subsidized commodity. "We've seen 2.4 million Mexican farmers unemployed, unemployable and homeless, who have left their homes in the interior to seek work at the maquiladoras, which primarily hire young women," Carrillo said. "When work is not available there, the U.S. economy is a magnet for Mexicans."

Carrillo said there were 4.5 million Mexicans in the United States in 1990. By 2008, the number had swelled to 12.7 million, with more than half of those people undocumented, she said.

Those burgeoning numbers and the strain on U.S. systems from healthcare to law enforcement has led to considerable discussion about immigration policy. In particular, a directive from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and its interpretation by local authorities has come under scrutiny and was included in a PBS Frontline program "Lost in Detention."

Carrillo said an ICE "hold" is a request for local law enforcement to keep a person in custody for 48 hours after the individual is eligible for release in order to facilitate transfer to ICE. "This is not the same as an arrest warrant," she explained. "It is a request so that ICE can start an investigation."

She cited instances where people were stopped for traffic violations such as improper lane changes and then ended up in an ICE detention center in the Chicago area, transported with shackled hands and feet, having never appeared before a judge and with no legal representation. "There is the notion that because these people are illegal, their rights can be trampled," she said, adding such actions are a violation of constitutional rights which apply to all people in the United States, not just citizens.

"Our organization started to hear about what we consider these human rights abuses after distressed family members contacted us," she said. Carrillo told the story of a young woman named Maria whose mother and father disappeared. "When we went to the jail (to look for them), there was no record of them having been there. They eventually surfaced after a few days in an ICE detention center in Chicago," she said.

In an interview following the presentation, Carrillo said her job with the Illinois People's Action is to "dispel the myths surrounding immigration and help educate the community that these are people, not numbers."

She said one argument she hears is that undocumented people "should just get legal status and contribute to the system." The problem with the current immigration system, Carrillo says, "is you can't just 'get in line' for legal status because there really is no line."

People from Mexico who applied for "green cards" in 1992 are just now being processed, she said. Carrillo obtained legal status after marriage to a U.S. citizen.

Students and others attending the presentation learned about the opportunity to volunteer with The Immigration Project, a nonprofit in Bloomington. The Obama Administration's program of Deferred Action Status for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) offers freedom from fear of immediate deportation, along with a temporary work permit (that MAY be renewable in two years). This program is based on the executive branch's discretionary authority to determine deportation priorities. It is NOT based on any specific legislation passed by Congress. As such, if the Executive Branch changes their deportation priorities, this program may be terminated.

The Immigration Project, based in Bloomington, is hosting a registration event for this program at the Shirk Center on Sept. 21 and 22. Eligibility information, registration forms, and legal advice will be available at the site.

Prior to the registration event, there will be two different volunteer training sessions held on Sept. 17 at 4 p.m. and at 7 p.m. Those interested may register online for one of the sessions at <http://www.iwu.edu/human-rights/DACA-registration.html>

Contact: **Kim Hill**, (309) 556-3960