

## Immigration Reform: Just a Dream?

by Rose Grengs

Every first Sunday of the month a group of supporters, sponsored by the Interfaith Coalition on Immigration, gather in front of the Ramsey County Detention Center, just east of downtown St. Paul, to hold a vigil of support for the detained immigrants inside. Their message is simple: Immigrants are human; they deserve dignity. Our government needs to stop breaking up families, deporting hard working people, and treating immigrants like criminals. We need a change from enforcement-only policies to fixing our broken immigration system.

Is this message being heard amidst the chaotic anti-immigrant roar in the nation today? It's hard to say, but as a WAMM member and long-time Pete Seeger fan, I believe that we shall overcome some day and that this can be accomplished through the power of action and continued work. The following is a brief overview of the current state of immigration policy in our state and country as of today.

Minnesota: During this past state legislative session, anything that remotely had to do with immigrants was cut, slashed and punched. For example, bills were passed that made dramatic cuts in Medical Assistance for many immigrants and refugees, prohibited cities from enacting ordinances opting out of using police officers as immigration officials, mandated the implementation of the "Secure Communities" program (the sharing of citizenship data with the federal government), and restricted funding to organizations that provide free or low-cost legal services to immigrants. There is even more. For a good discussion on the impact of state's new immigration legislation, see [www.immigrationpolicy.org](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org).

The DREAM Act: Every year thousands of undocumented students graduate from U.S. high schools with no future to look forward to (390,000 last year). The federal DREAM Act (acronym for Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors), was reintroduced in the U.S. Senate in early May. If passed, it would give the opportunity to apply for permanent resident status to certain undocumented kids who came to the U.S. as children and attended high school, as well as planned to have or already have attended two years of college or served two years in the military. The bill would possibly to be paired with more enforcement measures to win support in the current congress. But in reality, it has little chance of success.

Executive Action: As Congress is too mired in politics to reform our broken immigration system, plenty of voices are demanding executive action. Yet, President Obama continues to walk a fine line on the issue. On one hand he says he supports immigration reform, but on the other, declares that his "hands are tied" in doing anything about it. Many disagree and are calling for stronger leadership and action.

Are President Obama's hands tied as he insists? Legal experts have issued a memo defining how much executive power the president has when it comes to immigration. (Read more at [www.immigrationpolicy.org](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org).) He can, for example, exercise discretion in deciding which individual cases to prosecute, grant deferred action to classes of immigrants, grant Deferred Enforced Departure to groups of foreign nationals, and authorize humanitarian parole on a "case-by-case" basis. He can also issue signing statements, which is a way all Administrations can shape regulations and administration policy determinations. While these measures are extraordinary, they have all been used by presidents in the past, and use of them now could show leadership on the part of Obama who has thus far not used his executive power to block deportation of eligible students as defined in the DREAM Act.

Of these measures, deferred action is the one that many people, organizations and advocates are most calling for the president to use as a way of demonstrating that he is serious about immigration reform and to balance his heretofore enforcement-heavy policy of record high levels of deportations. What is deferred action? While deferred action is not a specific status, it is a mechanism by which the government gives some cases lower priority and doesn't act on them. The major benefit to recipients of deferred action, aside from not being deported, is that they can be granted employment authorization.

In April, 22 Senators, including Majority Leader Harry Reid, sent a letter to President Obama asking him to grant "deferred action" to DREAM Act-eligible students. This would be a good first step.

It is highly unlikely that anything close to comprehensive immigration reform will be seen soon. But, the little voices in front of the Ramsey County Detention Center are only part of a ripple that could start to shape a vision for the future for the millions of people directly affected by the broken immigration system.

If you would like more information about immigration reform or a speaker for your organization, contact Rose Grengs at [r.grengs@comcast.net](mailto:r.grengs@comcast.net).



On the first Sunday of every month, supporters gather in front of the Ramsey County Detention Center, just east of downtown St. Paul, to hold a vigil of support for the detained immigrants inside.

Photo by Rose Grengs

Rose M. Grengs is a WAMM member, mother, grandmother, immigration lawyer and advocate. She is retired from her private law practice, but continues to represent low-income clients as a volunteer and is actively involved in trying to change and improve immigration laws.