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N.M. bishops back driver's licenses for undocumented

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Immigration and the Church

SANTA FE, N.M. -- Allowing undocumented immigrants living in New Mexico to have a driver's license if they can provide a valid ID is a matter of "mercy, fairness and safety," said the state's three Catholic bishops.

"We are in favor of allowing individuals without Social Security numbers to obtain licenses provided that they present other acceptable forms of identification, such as a valid passport, consular identification card, or other recognized government-issued documents, currently required by present law," they said.

"We believe this is in the interest of all New Mexicans," said Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of Santa Fe and Bishops Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces and James S. Wall of Gallup in a statement published Aug. 17 as an op-ed piece in the Albuquerque Journal daily newspaper.

It was released Aug. 15 in Santa Fe by the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops, the public policy arm of the bishops.

The three Catholic leaders said they support the positive contributions immigrants have brought to New Mexico and the rest of the country but at the same time recognize the right of the United States to regulate its borders and control immigration.

The bishops said they understand people's frustration that the illegal status of some immigrants in the United States and the lack of action on comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level, reform that is of "enormous importance." But laws and public policies must treat immigrants with justice and dignity, they added.

In New Mexico right now, the issue of driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants must be a priority, they said, and they oppose efforts to repeal the current law that allows such licenses.

According to the Albuquerque Journal, Republican Gov. Susana Martinez tried unsuccessfully to get the law repealed during this year's legislative session and plans to put the issue on the agenda of a special session scheduled to begin Sept. 6.

Only a handful of states grant driver's licenses to people regardless of their immigration status.

According to Martinez, New Mexico's 2003 law, signed by her Democratic predecessor, Gov. Bill Richardson, is making the state "a magnet" for people who enter the United States illegally. She recently announced the state's Motor Vehicle Division would conduct random checks of license holders who are foreign nationals to determine their residency.

In their statement, New Mexico's Catholic bishops listed several reasons undocumented residents should be allowed to get a driver's license.

"Licenses for all drivers make our highways safer, since unlicensed drivers have not been tested and, therefore, present a potential danger to everyone using our roads," they said. "In addition, unlicensed drivers tend to raise everyone's insurance rates since the former cannot obtain auto insurance.

"Licensed drivers make our communities safer because they are more easily identified and tracked," they continued. "If a law enforcement officer stops an unlicensed driver, that individual might easily give a false name.

"Such names would not be found in the state's database, thus undermining law enforcement's efforts to determine whether there are outstanding warrants or other matters related to the person in question."

Without access to a legal driver's license, they said, undocumented immigrants "would not be able to travel to their places of employment, undermining the economic stability of their families as well as the many New Mexico businesses, farms, and ranches that depend on their labor."

The bishops said most people in the United States illegally came without documents because there is a shortage of legal visas allowing people to enter the country.

"Comprehensive immigration reform would replace illegality with a system based on legal presence and legal entry. This would restore the rule of law to a chaotic system while protecting the basic dignity and lives of our fellow brothers and sisters, as well as preserving the dignity of the rule of law," they said.

The bishops emphasized they're not calling for 'a system of 'amnesty,'" but reform requiring "those who have broken the law to earn their legal status by paying a fine, paying taxes, learning English, and waiting at the back of a long line to have the opportunity of becoming a United States citizen."

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