



CHURCHES TO BEGIN PROVIDING SANCTUARY TO ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

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Two churches intend to give sanctuary to illegal immigrants to protect them from deportation and pressure lawmakers to provide a chance at U.S. citizenship.

Beginning Wednesday afternoon, a Catholic church in downtown Los Angeles and a Lutheran church in North Hollywood each intend to shelter one person as part of the "New Sanctuary Movement."

A handful of churches in other U.S. cities plan similar efforts in the months ahead to spotlight the plight of illegal immigrants.

"We want to put a human face to very complex immigration laws and awaken the consciousness of the human spirit," said Father Richard Estrada of Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church in Los Angeles, where one illegal immigrant will live.

Organizers don't believe immigration agents will make arrests inside the churches.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency has not tried to arrest Elvira Arellano, an illegal immigrant who has taken shelter at a Methodist church in Chicago since August.

ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice declined to say if agents would attempt to arrest others who take sanctuary in churches, although she did say agents have "the authority to arrest those who are in violation of our immigration laws anywhere in the United States."

Participating churches in San Diego, Seattle, Chicago and New York won't initially house illegal immigrants. Instead, leaders will provide legal council, accompany people to court hearings and prepare plans to house them in churches if authorities try to deport them.

In New York, religious leaders gathered at the Roman Catholic Church of St. Paul the Apostle and said their promise of sanctuary could include financial assistance, legal help and physical protection, if necessary.

"For us, sanctuary is an act of radical hospitality, the welcoming of the stranger who is like ourselves, the stranger in our midst, our neighbors, our friends," said Rabbi Michael Feinberg of the Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition.

Two families facing deportation stood with the religious leaders. Jani, a U.S. citizen who did not give her last name, said her Haitian-born husband Jean is facing deportation because of a 1989 drug conviction in the U.S. that put him in prison for 11 years.

She said the family would take refuge in a church, if necessary, rather than be separated.

Anti-illegal immigration groups called the sanctuary effort misguided.

The faith groups "don't seem to realize that they are being charitable with someone else's resources, and that's not charity," said Ira Mehlman of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors limits on immigration.

"We are talking about illegal immigrants taking someone else's job, filling up the classroom of someone else's child," he said.

The sanctuary effort is loosely based on a movement in the 1980s, when churches harbored Central American refugees fleeing wars in their home countries.

Organizers of the current movement include members of the Jewish, Muslim, Catholic and other faiths.

The plans come as immigration reform legislation has been stalled since last summer, and tens of thousands of illegal immigrants have been detained and deported in stepped up immigration raids in recent months.

The first to receive refuge in Los Angeles will be a single father from Mexico who has two children who are U.S. citizens, said Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, executive director of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, an interfaith association spearheading the national plans.

The man, whose name was not released, worked 17 years as a cook at Los Angeles International Airport before getting injured on the job more than a year ago, she said. He has been unable to work and is facing deportation.

"If he goes back to Mexico, the family will literally not have enough food to eat," she said.

The other church will shelter an unidentified Guatemalan man who runs a small gardening business and has two U.S. citizen children. He fled Guatemala in the 1990s during its civil war. He has been denied political asylum and is facing deportation.

The churches put out calls for immigrants who were willing and wanted to take part in the sanctuary movement. Immigrants were screened to make sure they paid taxes and didn't have criminal backgrounds, Salvatierra said.