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## Church Opens Doors to Undocumented Students

Local religious, community leaders support immigration reform.

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THE GAZETTE

**R**ising Hope UMC and VOICE (Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement) co-sponsored what was billed as a solidarity call for action on Sunday, April 25, to help immigrant youth in particular and immigrants in general.

The focus of the gathering was to urge enactment of the pending federal legislation known as the DREAM Act that would provide a way for undocumented individuals to become legal residents.

Attended by more than 100 religious and community leaders and activists, the event featured appeals from religious leaders as well as undocumented students from Northern Virginia and Florida.

Students spoke about their plight; for example, after graduating from high school they are unable to obtain legal U.S. resident status and, therefore, are unable to obtain financial aid to pay for their tuition.

In the case of Virginia, undocumented students are unable to obtain in-state tuition status because they do not have a U.S. residency certification from the U.S. immigration and naturalization service. If their parents were undocumented immigrants they are undocumented immigrants also, regardless of their length of stay in the U.S.

In addition, the students expressed fears that they and/or their parents may be deported. Four Florida students who walked approximately 1,500 miles from Miami, Fla. to Washington, D.C. just arrived this weekend and were featured as part of the solidarity event. They described KKK-type hateful and scary experiences during their journey through the deep south, and also stories of support and compassion elsewhere.

One of the students, Felipe Matos, illustrated the situation tens of thousands of recently graduated undocumented students face upon graduation from high school. Without a resident status he could not ac-



Rising Hope UMC hosted a gathering to hear from four undocumented students who walked from Florida on their way to Congress to discuss immigration reform.

cept admission to Duke University because he did not qualify for financial aid.

"It is not my enemies that hurt my cause, it is the silence of my friends," said Matos.

Another student pointed out that if you are an undocumented immigrant you can-

not volunteer and pursue a career in the U.S. military. As they pointed out, except for a piece of paper, they are Americans, and want to remain so.

**FEDERAL IMMIGRATION** Reform legislation, in this case called the DREAM Act, was introduced in Congress last year that would address the residency status of undocumented immigration students. This is not the comprehensive immigration reform legislation also pending before Congress, although it could be folded into the more overarching reform legislation.

The Florida students, joined by northern Virginia immigrant students and community and religious leaders, planned to visit members of Congress in the coming days urging that the existing or a revised DREAM act be enacted. They also planned to communicate to President Obama that he issue an Executive Order to stop deporting law-abiding immigrants.

Venus Miller, VOICE Team Member from Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Woodbridge, and administrator, Northern Virginia Community College, said, "These young people are our nation's future innovators and entrepreneurs."

Attendees gathered Sunday to worship, sing, and listen to calls for action to pass compassionate immigration reform legislation and bring an end to the fear and polarizing effect of the present status that has left hundreds of thousands of people in limbo. They heard the Rev. Keary Kincannon, minister of Rising Hope UMC, Fr. Gerry Creedon currently head of St. Charles Borromeo RC and minister Herman Greenhill, Bethlehem Baptist Church of Alexandria, and Fr. Tuck Grinnell of St. Anthony at Padua call for action to end the impasse in Congress on reform legislation.

Kincannon, quoting Biblical themes, including Chapter 11, Book of Hebrews, said: "We are all aliens ... home lies in the Kingdom of God ... treat them all as our neighbor."

The attendees also listened to northern Virginia and Florida students of undocumented immigrant parents about what it is like to live without full resident status in

### The DREAM Act

Under the Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, certain undocumented individuals could become legal residents. The individual would have to enroll in a higher education institution or the U.S. military; after certain conditions are met, the individual could petition and be granted conditional residency. Under conditional residency status, the individual could be granted a private loan to finance their education. After that the individual could be granted permanent residency status. Eligibility for this program includes: entered the U.S. before 16 years of age; five years in the U.S. without interruption; ability to speak English. Participants under this program would not have to fear the deportation of their families.

the U.S. "The stories of Sayda and Liana [northern Virginia students] break the heart and challenge the soul," said Creedon. "A wall has been erected that is impossible for many of our best and brightest young people to scale. We know that education is the gate to opportunity but the wall facing many of our immigrant youth provides no opening, no gate. ... It is a defeat that drives some young people into the back alleys of despair ... We join with the walkers from Florida, those young people who have blazed a trail of dreams. For this country is built not on nightmares but on dreams; dreams of equality and freedom and opportunity for all of God's children."

U.S. Rep. Jim Moran (D-8), has supported

the DREAM Act legislation when it was first introduced. When contacted about the Sunday event and call for action to enact legislation that would enable undocumented students to obtain residency status and receive financial aid to attend college, he said: "Our immigration system is broken and young people who can make a significant contribution to our society by earning a college degree are falling through the cracks. We need comprehensive reform, and we need it soon." U.S. Rep. Gerald Connolly (D-11) was not available for comment by deadline.

According to VOICE, approximately 65,000 undocumented immigrant students nationally graduate from high school each year; many wait on their petition for resident status for long periods of time, up to 10 years, before they can realize the fulfillment of their dream of pursuing a college education and other pursuits available to others with U.S. resident status.

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