

This past summer, staff from the Archdiocese of Seattle traveled throughout Western Washington to listen to Hispanic Catholics share their experiences and their needs in this current immigration crisis. This *Groundwork for Solidarity on Immigration Project* was completed with the goals of (1) opening up more communication between vulnerable Hispanic immigrant communities with other Catholic parishes and ministries and (2) increasing collaboration among all communities in pastoral action and advocacy for immigrants. This project was not a social scientific study, not an assessment nor an evaluation of existing parish activities, but a pastoral listening to know and understand better the reality of Hispanic immigrant Catholics in Western Washington. Small groups of Hispanic Catholics in 12 parishes and programs in the Archdiocese (rural, urban, small and large) outside of King County, gathered to respond to key questions:

- ***How are you and your community experiencing the current immigration crisis?***
- ***How can other Catholic parishes help, support, or stand in solidarity with you and your community?***

**Here is a brief summary of what was heard.**

Nearly everyone reported some **fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability**. Some fear for themselves or family members being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); everyone knew someone recently detained or deported. Some felt uncertainty about their future, living in “mixed families”, where some members have legal status and some do not. Some felt vulnerable to profiling and harassment, either for themselves or their children. Some felt a deep uncertainty about pending asylum petitions, deportation orders, and the future of family members in the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma. They hope for the best but fear the worst. The backdrop for all this is uncertainty about federal immigration policy, ICE enforcement practice, and racial tolerance, all of which affect their lives.

- *“We are in limbo. We live in uncertainty, so we’re staying quiet, at home, hiding.”*
- *“What can we do except ride it out? This is our home. My kids were born here.”*

Against this backdrop, participants were open and they appreciated that someone from the Church had come to listen to their experiences – often painful and difficult – and their suggestions for next steps. They shared stories of tremendous resilience at home, work, and school, and in their parishes, all through a time of duress and uncertainty. Though some have found support in their parish communities, they voiced real needs. The following five needs were mentioned again and again, along with the suggested action steps.

### **Legal Aid**

This need was voiced everywhere by almost every participant. Immigration lawyers are expensive, and immigration legal service agencies are inundated. Without a lawyer, an undocumented immigrant who is detained by ICE is vulnerable to abuse in detention, neglect in the courts, and denial of their rights.

*“We don’t need people to help us fill out forms. That helped in the past, but the risks are higher now. We’re in a crisis, and we need good lawyers who can represent us in court.”*

- Recruit attorneys willing to volunteer representing vulnerable people in immigration proceedings.
- Start a fund to help immigrants in rural areas with legal costs.
- Disseminate a list of recommended, screened immigration attorneys.

### **Emergency Family Plans and Immigrant Rights**

Rural areas have seen few “Know Your Rights” workshops, and many participants did not know about Family Emergency Plans. Leaders voiced a need to find new ways to spread information and help others be prepared.

*“Single mothers are the most vulnerable people in this whole situation! Some have no family in the US or anywhere in the state. We need to reach out to them and help them prepare for an emergency.”*

- Recruit Latino young adults to be community resources on immigrant rights and family emergency plans.

### **Mental Health Services for Children**

Children in immigrant families need counseling, especially those who have witnessed members being arrested and detained, or youth who have been detained themselves, or the many kids who have been racially harassed at school. Few services exist, especially in rural areas.

*“How do I assure my kids that everything is OK, and at the same time sit down with them and explain a plan of what to do if I get arrested by ICE? Even talking about an emergency plan with our children is traumatic for them!”*

### **Addressing Racism and Nationalism among White Catholics**

At every conversation in this project Hispanic people reported that since January 2017, racist words and gestures are more frequent and open than in their prior experience. Almost all reported that their children have suffered from racism in school. They did not report racist experiences in their parishes, but they asked that the Church help white Catholics to overcome racism and nationalism, so that they may be leaven for inclusion and justice in our society.

*“We and our kids deal with racism all the time – it’s been a reality for years! We don’t need a workshop on racism. The Anglos need a workshop on racism.”*

- Offer effective anti-racism workshops in parishes and Catholic schools.

### **More visible solidarity in the Catholic Church in Western Washington.**

Along with the need for more services and more information, participants shared a longing to see the official Catholic Church standing in solidarity with them through public witness and visible action. Church statements, when they have reached Latino Catholics, have offered encouragement, yet participants shared that they are looking for the presence of their pastors alongside them in public, supporting their own voices for solidarity and immigration reform. Very few reported that their situation, fears, and hardship since January have been addressed in homilies in their parish. They expressed gratitude for the Church’s welcome and a longing for more public signs of solidarity.

*“We need new language: It’s not “these vulnerable people” or “those who are undocumented.” This is us. Undocumented immigrants are our brothers and sisters in the Catholic family.”*

*“We need to hear over and over that this church is our home, no matter what legal status we have, that we’re always safe here and we’re always welcome here.”*

*“The relations between the Hispanic community and the Anglo community in our parish are good; there are no problems. But it’s definitely two communities. The pastor never tells the Anglo community that our problems are their problems too.”*

Sponsoring offices of the Archdiocese were: Immigrant and Refugee Ministry, Office for Hispanic Ministry, and Missions Office (Catholic Campaign for Human Development). Funding included a start-up grant from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.