

Families divided by immigration enforcement call for 'humane reforms'

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SALT LAKE CITY — For families affected by the nation's broken immigration system, the holidays take on an entirely different meaning.

Speaking at a candlelight vigil held Wednesday night outside Main Street Plaza, Raymi Gutierrez recalled her family's holiday in 2008, when six family member received deportation letters the day after Christmas.

"All I knew was I was going to lose six members of my family," she said.

For Barbara Tapia Avelar, this will be the second Christmas she and her sisters will be apart from their parents. They were deported a year ago after federal immigration agents acted on a deportation order entered in 1997.

The two women shared their experiences at a vigil to call for changes in immigration law to help keep families together. The event also commemorated families that have been divided by workplace raids in Utah by federal immigration authorities.

Tapia Avelar, who along with her sisters were granted a one-year reprieve from deportation in June, said she hoped the event would help educate the community about the need for immigration reform and the broken system's impact on families.

"I hope this opens people's eyes and opens their minds and a little bit of their hearts," she said.

Wednesday was the sixth anniversary of a large-scale immigration raid at the Swift & Co. meatpacking plant in Hyrum, Cache County, which resulted in 147 people being charged with alleged offenses. Most of the people detained were deported, which divided families and spread fear among other undocumented workers and employers, advocates said. While some of the deported workers have returned to the United States, which is a criminal offense, other families left the country. Still other families remain divided.

Workplace raids are not a new phenomenon, said Mark Alvarez, a Spanish language radio talk show host and attorney. Federal, state and local authorities conducted a major raid in Wendover in 1986, detaining people "who looked Mexican," he said.

In 2001, Alvarez met with people arrested in a workplace raid at Salt Lake International Airport. Several people who were detained asked simply, "Why are we being treated like criminals?"

"I'm very sad to be here, " Alvarez said of the vigil, because it means the nation's immigration system has not been reformed. "I'm glad to see all of the concern for families being torn apart by these incidents."

It is time to push the Obama administration and Congress to make immigration reform a priority, he said.

"To the Republicans who want to go slow on immigration reform, remember, remember the 6th of November," Alvarez said, referring to Election Day.

Gutierrez, a member of the Salt Lake Dream Team, said immigration enforcement activities that separate families spotlight the need for "humane immigration reform."

"Please talk to your Congress members, your legislators. We don't want any more families to be separated. We don't want any more children to be without parents at Christmas. We don't want any more brothers missing from the dinner table," Gutierrez said.

The Avelar sisters keep in contact with their parents via Skype, Facebook and phone.

Her parents are living with her grandparents about two hours outside of Mexico City. Her father is working as a security guard.

Tapia Avelar said she hopes for the best as the family's case is pending. This time of year, though, being apart from her parents is difficult.

Her daughter Abigail, 10, especially misses her grandparents when she plays soccer because they attended nearly all of her games before they were deported. "She sees the other girls' grandparents at the games and she just stares. She probably thinking she wishes her grandparents were there," Tapia Avelar said.

Abigail Tapia, who addressed the vigil, said she continues to worry about her mother, especially when she sees white vans like the one that immigration agents used to carry away her mother, aunts and grandparents on Dec. 7, 2011.

"I'm always saying ICE is going to come to my house and take my mom," she said.

Her mother urged federal solutions. "I hope President Obama can do something for families so they're not separated like mine," she said.

<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/print/865568647/Families-divided-by-immigration-enforcement-call-for-humane-reforms.html>