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Immigration overhaul urged

By Juan Perez Jr. and Susan Szalewski

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A south Omaha Catholic church overflowed Sunday with 600 people calling for an overhaul of immigration laws.

Across town, 100 people at a United Methodist chapel heard personal stories from immigrants hoping that Congress will create a path to legalization.

The local events coincided with a national march in Washington, D.C. -- attended by more than 30 Nebraskans -- that was intended to inject life into the stalled immigration debate.

The ultimate goal: to nudge Congress to revamp the country's immigration system, including finding an avenue for undocumented immigrants to gain legal status.

Luis Marcos stood before the group inside the Mead Chapel at Omaha's First United Methodist Church to tell his story.

He left Guatemala for the United States at age 17 to join family members who already had made the trek north. Now he works as a phlebotomist.

Drawing people's blood for a living has taught him a lesson about humanity, Marcos said.

"It's red, and it's nice and warm," Marcos said. "No matter who you are."

The Rev. Neal Wilkinson said the rallies were designed in part to reinforce the notion that the United States was a country founded by and for immigrants.

"This is so long overdue," he said of immigration legislation. "We all have to remember where we came from."

At Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, an estimated 600 crammed into pews and aisles for a Mass followed by speeches in support of immigrant rights, said co-organizer Abbie Kretz of the Heartland Workers Center.

Symbolic gifts were brought to the altar with the bread and wine.

An old shoe symbolized those who crossed the desert into the United States, a white cross for those who died trying to make the journey, handcuffs for those who have been jailed

for not having papers, a hard hat and a hammer for the work of immigrants and their dignity as human beings, a book for young people and the future, and roses for the Virgin Mary in a petition for her prayer as a mother.

The speakers stressed hope.

The Rev. Jose Mendoza, administrator at the church, compared today's Latino immigrants to the Israelites in the time of Moses.

“God helped them into the promised land,” Mendoza said during his homily, just as “God gave a new land” to today's immigrants. The Latinos also are looking to God for liberty, he said.

A junior in high school told her personal story to the congregation.

The 17-year-old said she arrived from Mexico 10 years ago on Christmas Eve. She said she remembered how sad her mother was because she had no gifts for her children.

The teenager said she faces an uncertain future, with no documents to work in the U.S. and with few scholarships available because she is not a citizen. But she is hopeful, she said.

Conchita Hernandez, a student at the Nebraska Center for the Blind, was among the Nebraskans who traveled by bus and plane to get to the march in Washington. She was joined by representatives of agencies including the Nebraska Appleseed Center and the League of Nebraska Municipalities.

“It was really inspiring to see all those people coming together for the common cause,” Hernandez said.

Authorities in Washington didn't provide crowd estimates, but the mall was full of people for blocks.

People held signs with slogans such as, “You need us as much as we need you,” and “No Human Being Is Illegal.”

Many waved American flags, and a few also carried the banners of their countries of origin.

Once an illegal immigrant herself, Hernandez, 24, said Sunday was her first march for immigration legislation. Earlier this year she spoke before Nebraska lawmakers in favor of keeping the in-state tuition law and has made it a personal mission to help swing the pendulum in favor of creating a path to legalization.

While in Washington, she said, she met many young people who are successful students but can't continue a college education or find a professional career path because of their illegal status.

Robert Dorton, an immigration attorney for Lutheran Family Services, also attended the six-hour event that featured a taped promise for change from President Barack Obama.

Dorton said Sunday's nationwide activities gave him hope that Congress will stop their stall and actually consider a change in immigration laws.

"I sense a softening of people's attitudes," said Dorton. "People are starting to look at this as a practical issue. I think people are ready to move forward."

He and other Nebraskans are scheduled to meet Monday with Nebraska's congressional delegation. The meeting is intended to "put a face" on the illegal immigration issue, Dorton said. People from all walks of life students, professionals, religious leaders will offer their pitch to the politicians, he said.

Also this weekend, about 300 people from four religious congregations marched through downtown Grand Island, Neb., to draw attention to the call for immigration legislation.

"It was a success," coordinator Felipe Cruz said of the Saturday interfaith event. "Three hundred is a good number, especially with the type of weather we had."

In Grand Island and elsewhere, coordinators urged participants to fill out postcards written by the U.S. Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops that support changes in the immigration system.