by Larry Tung
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When Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently issued an executive order that permitted city employees to report undocumented immigrants to law enforcement authorities, he was reversing a long-standing ban on such a practice by his three predecessors as mayor, Ed Koch, David Dinkins, and Rudy Giuliani. The ban on disclosure had been intended to encourage undocumented immigrants to make use of such city services as health care, social services, and police and fire protection without fear of being detained or deported.

It would be easy to conclude from his lifting of the ban that the nationwide and federal fear of immigrants has made its way to New York. But earlier last month, on his weekly radio show, Bloomberg expressed the view that all undocumented immigrants should be made American citizens.

His lifting of the ban was to put him in compliance with a court order. But his view on legalizing the undocumented is more in keeping with the local attitude, one that has resulted in a push for protection of immigrants in several areas.

Access Without Fear

While the mayor reversed the ban on disclosure of immigration status, more than 30 members of the New York City Council sponsored an "Access Without Fear" bill (Intro 326) that would turn such a ban into law.

Many believe that the need for such a law is greater in the post-9/11 New York as incidents of detention and deportation, as well as "special registration" of males from Muslim countries, have concerned tens of thousands of New York residents and have greatly intensified the climate of fear in the Muslim and South Asian communities.

"Effective law enforcement and public health protection are impossible without the cooperation

of New York's immigrant communities," said Margie McHugh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition in a public hearing at the City Council on May 5. "But in order to have cooperation, the city must first establish trust with those communities."

Language Assistance in Hospitals

According to the 2000 Census, over 1.1 million New York State residents do not speak English well or at all, and nearly half of New York City residents speak a language other than English at home. Among them, many are undocumented immigrants who receive health care services.

In an attempt to better serve hospital visitors with limited English proficiency, more than 20 members of the New York State Legislature proposed a bill to require hospitals to provide language assistance services to patients who need them. The bill would also require that frequently used forms essential to a patient's care and treatment be available in all of the primary languages spoken by a hospital's patient population.
"Ensuring appropriate language access will reduce the number of repeat visits, emergency room visits, misdiagnosis, and uncollectible debts at hospitals," the New York Immigration Coalition has argued.

Dream Act

To many illegal immigrants and their children, the best way to realize the American dream is through education. However, many of the 50,000 or so undocumented immigrants who graduate from high school in the United States every year face a common dilemma: They cannot apply for college without a green card, or they simply cannot afford the tuition.

Public officials and immigrant advocates are pushing for a law to help those students.

"Children don't make decisions about how they come to this country," Rep. Robert Mendendez, D-Union City, New Jersey, told the Bergen County Record. "When good students who want to continue their education and contribute to this country are prevented from reaching their full potential?â,¬?we're all deprived."

"The situation for theses students is really, really difficult," Claudia Gomez, an advocate with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights in Oakland, told the San Jose Mercury News. "They can't legalize their status on their own because there's no mechanism for it."

A bill called the DREAM Act - which stands for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act - would legalize the status of those students who are under 21 years of age, have earned a high school diploma or equivalent, be of "good moral character", and have lived in the United States for at least five years.

Another proposal, which is called the Student Adjustment Act and is sponsored by many members of the House, offers a similar solution.
The Dream Act died in the Senate last year but is expected to be reintroduced soon.

Meanwhile, New York is one of four states to have passed laws to allow undocumented students to pay resident tuition rates. In the City University of New York, undocumented students who have spent a minimum of two years attending high school in the state pay the lower in-state tuition.

These laws were not universally welcomed. "Allowing illegal immigrants to study at CUNY was a national security issue and an insult to every citizen and legal immigrant seeking a higher education," said State Senator Frank Padavan, a Republican from Queens.

"This is a slap in the face to everyone who believes in the rule of law," Jim Ludwick, President of Oregonians for Immigration Reform, told the Associated Press. "No matter what you do for these people, it's not enough. The sky is the limit."

But officials at City University itself seem relieved that a law passed a year ago in the New York

State Legislature reversed an earlier policy that the educators had said they were forced to implement, hiking tuition for the undocumented in order to comply with federal law.

"I take great pride in CUNY's historic role as a ladder of upward mobility for many generations of immigrants," Chancellor Matthew Goldstein has said. "Our city, state, and nation have greatly benefited as a result."

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