



## Faith groups take up immigration, health issues

*Forum Saturday will bring together local elected officials, advocates for change*

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Palo Alto Weekly Staff

Yvette Jimenez-Mota, 17, an American citizen and the daughter of undocumented immigrant parents, says she understands that the United States must protect its borders.

"I do agree about border security and people committing crimes and they shouldn't be here," she said.

But although her parents have been living illegally in the U.S. for 24 years, she can't comprehend that the country of her birth is splitting up families such as her own.

"The U.S. should take priority in keeping families united. We need comprehensive immigration reform: family unity and work visas," said Jimenez-Mota, a senior at Aragon High School in San Mateo.

Jimenez-Mota has become the sole breadwinner for her five siblings and her mother, who is unable to work while she fights deportation. Her father was deported to Mexico in December 2008, she said.

With no money for rent, the family was taken in by the Shelter Network in Menlo Park. For the first time, her family relies on government assistance, taking food stamps that don't last through the month, she said.

"The last two weeks of the month, we have no balance left. We are trying to get as much out of the food stamps as we can, but there are days when there is not enough to eat. Sometimes we just have bread and butter," she said.

On Saturday, Mota will speak at a public forum, "Healthy, United Families," sponsored by the group Peninsula Interfaith Action (PIA), to which many Palo Alto and East Palo Alto churches belong.

Forum organizers are hoping that by bringing local elected officials together with individuals such as Jimenez-Mota, the officials will commit to policy changes for both immigration and health care. State Assemblyman Ira Ruskin and a representative for State Sen. Joe Simitian are expected to attend.

Jimenez-Mota said the two issues are tied together and both are human-rights crises.

"I want the public to know ... there are times when you have to stop thinking politically and start thinking humanly," she said.

Some Palo Alto church leaders have been actively addressing the human side of both issues.

Immigration has been a large issue for Dr. Anthony Darrington, reverend of Jerusalem Baptist Church, even though the congregation does not have a large immigrant population, he said.

To him, it doesn't matter if the immigrants arrived illegally. In Darrington's eyes, the commitment to minister against suffering is the same.

"It's not an American-born thing; it's a God thing. It's not a race thing; it's a human-race thing," he said.

Darrington's congregation has taken an active role in helping immigrants who face deportation and their families, who -- like Jimenez-Mota's family -- can lose both income and basic necessities, he said.

Congregants become sponsors for immigrants who are in danger of homelessness, fund attorneys to advocate for those facing deportation, and find jobs for those who are without means of support, he said.

At Our Lady of the Rosary and St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic parishes, congregants have been actively involved in supporting health initiatives and helping immigrants in distress, according to Alma Lalonde, a parishioner at Our Lady and representative to PIA.

As a community, parishioners take in families who have become homeless, she said.

The church works closely with the nonprofit St. Vincent de Paul Society, supplying food and clothing. St. Vincent helps in emergency situations by paying a few months' rent for people, she said.

Darrington said the two topics of Saturday's forum, immigration and health care, are not mutually exclusive.

"One major connection with health and immigrants is that, when the legality of immigrants is so difficult, it keeps people out of the system's eye. People struggle with disease that would otherwise be cured easily," he said.

Staff at All Saints Episcopal Church, Palo Alto, has experienced first-hand the impact of a failed health system, said Rev. Sheridan Harrison, interim pastor.

"I use some of my discretionary funds to pay for prescription medicines for people who fall through the cracks," she said.

Thomas Atwood, a PIA leader for Unitarian Universalist Church, said many families will join those ranks if the state cuts the California Healthy Families Program, which provides low-cost insurance and dental care to children in need. Many of those children are American citizens -- and children of undocumented immigrant parents.

The "Healthy, United Families" forum is scheduled to take place at First United Methodist Church, 2915 Broadway, Redwood City, from 3 to 4:30 p.m.