

Testimony of Angel Pelaez to the Philadelphia City Council Committee on Public Safety

March 12, 2014

Hello, my name is Angel Pelaez and I have been a resident in the city of Philadelphia for fifteen years. I want to begin my testimony with a typical problem I see in this city. Three weeks ago I went to move my truck when I saw in my rearview mirror a person approach my vehicle and place a package in the body of the truck behind my rear tire of what I can only assume were drugs as this has happened to many of my neighbors before. In my neighborhood it is a frequent occurrence to see the police searching for drugs like the one that was placed in my truck. Most people would notify the police if such an incident occurred but I as an undocumented person do not wish to involve police. I don't call the police because I'm afraid involving them will lead to me being deported.

I will return to my experience as an undocumented person in Philadelphia but first I want to speak briefly on why we have seen such an increase in undocumented immigration to this United States for council to better understand what an immigrant in Philadelphia feels every day.

We have seen a significant increase in undocumented immigration to the United States largely in part to the economic and political policies this country has enforced in other parts of world. As a result of these policies or government interventions we have seen economic and political instability increase in many countries in Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and East Asia. Examples of those policies or actions include North American Free Trade Agreement (also known as NAFTA) other free trade agreements, Operation Condor and the War on Drugs.

Although we have seen an uptick in undocumented immigration from all of all these regions of the world there has been most notably an increase of immigration from Latin America due to its proximity to the United States. Specifically, after 1996 it can be clearly seen how the undocumented immigration to the U.S has increasedⁱ from Latin American countries due to the passage of NAFTA. The free trade agreement has hurt the most vulnerable populations of our countries. Most migration is poor people of color, these aren't rich people leaving their countriesⁱⁱ, often times its agricultural workers. In my home country of Ecuador my country was torn apart by bankers and politicians. After they robbed blind Ecuador and destroyed my country they fled to Miami to avoid conviction. As a result of their robbery millions of Ecuadorians were left with no jobs and little to no opportunity to support our families. Because of occurrence like this in Ecuador and many other Latin American countries millions of Latinos have found themselves with no other choice but to make the long trek from their home countries to the U.S., often times risking their lives to cross the U.S./Mexican border. I have seen that the need cross without papers comes from the inability to present the appropriate documentation or money to solicit a visa to enter the U.S.

I bring all of this up to because I want city council to understand the hardships immigrants have had to face to arrive in this country and why. We are not here to take jobs, we are here to build a life, contribute to this country and to provide for are families. I have not seen my children in fifteen years. I did not choose to be separated from my family, it is because of the conditions in Ecuador that I had no choice but to come here in order to provide my children with the future they deserve.

But there are many immigrants who have come here to start anew. Many who have built their lives here, are raising their children, running their businesses right here in Philadelphia. And after all we have gone through to find opportunity we continue to live in constant fear. Fear of being deported.

And part of this fear lies within how we interact with Police. I have seen many community members stopped by Philadelphia police and after wards handed over to ICE agents. It is because of this fear of deportation, this fear that our local police will call ICE that I do not want to work with police about the drugs problems on my block. By ending the enforcement of all ICE holds community members would know that Philadelphia police are no longer using their time to enforce federal immigration laws. By separating the criminal justice system from the federal immigration system we can create an opportunity for the immigrant community to no longer fear working with the Police.

This country needs real immigrant reform, reform that addresses the root causes of immigration that I have already laid out. But unfortunately this country has decided the remedy to stop immigration is deportation. Let's be clear, deportations will not stop immigration from happening, the only thing deportations create is fear within the community, broken dreams and separated families. There are many things that need to be changed in our immigration system but the city of Philadelphia has an opportunity to take action on one part of this broken system. By ending the enforcement of all ICE holds we can take a step forward to protect the immigrant community, keep families together, and create a safe city for all.

ⁱ<http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/illegal.pdf>

ⁱⁱhttp://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/atissue/AI_711HJAI.pdf