CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

Interested Party Testimony
SB 238
May 25, 2010

Thank you Chairman Buehrer. Vice-Chairman Faber, Ranking Minority Member Schiavoni, and members of the committee, my name is Jim Tobin. I am an Associate Director with the Catholic Conference of Ohio. The Catholic community, like so many other faith communities, across the state has many shared experiences with immigrant families throughout Ohio. I testify today as an interested party regarding SB 238.

We believe supporters of this bill have made sincere arguments that unauthorized workers ought not benefit from our state's worker compensation system. We also believe that opponents have raised sincere arguments that an insurance system, such as workers compensation, ought to cover all workers who are legitimately working, regardless of their legal status.

The Catholic Conference is not opposed to the enforcement of immigration laws. We believe such enforcement should be proportional to the need, and respect the human rights and dignity of all persons. Special care should be given to preserving families and providing humane treatment throughout the process. Our preference is that the lead enforcement should come from trained federal officers.

At the same time, we believe that our current immigration system is unsustainable, overly restrictive and unjust. We need far-reaching and comprehensive reform of this broken system.

We suggest that one motivation for heightened state enforcement bills, such as SB 238, is a deep, deep frustration over the lack of federal reform. We share in this frustration. It is our understanding that each year our current federal system provides for only 5000 permanent visas for unskilled laborer to enter our country. However, the demand for workers is much higher, since as many as 300,000 unauthorized persons are absorbed in the U.S. workforce each year. The majority of these unauthorized workers are actually recruited by our businesses. In Ohio, the current economic recession has only exacerbated this frustration.

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In our Church's previous statements and testimonies on other state immigration initiatives, we have asked legislative leaders to consider potential unintended consequences of heightened state enforcement of immigration laws. Will passage of SB 238 fuel the already divisive, tense and emotional feelings around our current immigration practices? We humbly question whether this bill, coming in the heels of the Arizona law, might be "harmfully provocative"? Being provocative can be healthy, and certainly this bill has brought forth debate. We fear, however, that this debate- as part of the larger debate on immigration policies- may bring out the worst in our human nature. It may play to our prejudices and fears. It may provide more heat than light, more passion than progress. After this debate, will we be a society more divided, a people more confused, and a nation and state unable to move forward on one of the most serious and complicated issues we face in this country?

As a faith based organization, we seek to promote the common good, a common dialogue, common civility, and a common care for all persons. We encourage all of us to continue seeking answers to the ever-present questions: Who are my neighbors? How can we, as a society, better reflect God's love for such neighbors?

Thank you for this opportunity.