

# LIBRARIANS AS ADVOCATES FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANTS

by Kathleen de la Peña McCook

— *Make your priority to serve the community regardless of an individual's legal status* —

Librarian's Toolkit for Responding Effectively  
to Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

Immigration was the focus of much discussion in the summer of 2007. The issues are complex and U.S. libraries as communities have taken different stances on serving undocumented people. With the “Secure Borders, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Reform Act” of 2007 having failed to pass the Senate, and the STRIVE ACT (“Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy” – H.R. 1645) stalled in the House, librarians must look ahead to safeguard human rights for immigrants who live and work among us as first priority.

As groups supporting immigrants' rights reorganize in light of legislative failure, librarians can assist with *Ya es hora ¡Ciudadanía!*, a national campaign to inform, educate, and motivate the over eight million legal permanent residents living in the U.S. who are eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship. National Council of La Raza is partnering with the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, Service Employees International Union, and Univision on this effort.

To assist librarians who chose to take advocacy roles I present a summary of the last 18 months of librarian actions on behalf of people who may be undocumented in the U.S.

The Progressive Librarians Guild passed a “Resolution against Anti-Immigrant Legislation” on March 15, 2006. The Sensenbrenner Bill – H.R. 4437 – was the basis for developing the resolution, and the PLG took a strong pro-immigrant stance declaring in the text of the resolution:

...Be it further resolved that the Progressive Librarians Guild will alert its members to take an active part in the education of members' communities about immigration and social justice for Latino and other immigrant communities;

Be it further resolved that the Progressive Librarians Guild will promote libraries as sites and library workers as providers of citizen education about immigration issues and encourage library workers to act as advocates for the education of undocumented immigrants about their human rights.

In 2006 millions of immigrants marched for justice throughout the United States. On April 10 over 100 cities held demonstrations. Spanish-language media led by such locutores as Eddie Sotelin ('Piolin'/'Tweety') encouraged immigrants to march for rights against the Sensenbrenner Bill. On April 12 REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking, passed a "Resolution Opposing the Sensenbrenner Bill" In my Florida community over 100 people – documented and undocumented – linked hands at an intersection in rural Wimauma to mark un dia sin inmigrante on May 1.

REFORMISTAS published *The Librarian's Toolkit for Responding Effectively to Anti-Immigrant Sentiment* in May 2006 which provides materials for use by library administrators, staff, and all other interested parties in an effort to enlighten, inform, and expand their knowledge of immigrants and their rights to free public library access. *Versed: The Bulletin of the Office for Diversity* produced a special issue on immigration in May-June and stated: "In the century-long tradition of providing Library services to immigrants, rather than asking how we can lock people out of Library services, we should be asking, what kind of services can we deliver to meet our community members' needs best and how can we do this better than in the past century?" (Carpenter and Hurn).

Throughout summer and fall 2006 a backlash began to form against immigrant rights. In an analysis of the role of Lou Dobbs, "Nightly Nativism," Daphne Eviator characterizes Dobbs who has held forth on his news program vilifying immigrants. She views Dobbs as following in a long line of Americans who have played pivotal roles in the nation's periodic outbreaks of nativism. "For the hundreds of thousands who tune in faithfully to watch Lou Dobbs, securing our "broken borders" may be as much about preserving white American culture as about security or economics. It's a cause white nationalists have long advanced. But it's a new role for television news."

Increased enforcement such as the massive Swift raids on December 12, 2006 saw more than 1,000 agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement show up at 6 a.m. at Swift meatpacking plants to search for illegal immigrants. Over 1,000 were arrested, many deported and families left to suffer (Preston).

In January 2007 REFORMA passed the "Resolution in Support of Immigrant Rights" which was submitted to the American Library Association and approved and adopted by ALA Council on Wednesday, January 22, 2007.

This resolution combined with the advocacy and commitment to social justice and human rights promoted by the REFORMA and PLG 2006 actions give librarians a solid ethical and organizational history to stand up to help immigrants.

In March 2007 Reps. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.) and Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) submitted the 697 page STRIVE Act (Security through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy-H.R. 1645) about which Janet Murguía, president of the National Council of La Raza, observed:

“The “STRIVE Act” includes elements to fix the broken immigration system: a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, a new worker visa program so that future immigrants can arrive legally, a reduction in family immigration backlogs which allows American families to unite in a reasonable time period, and smart enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the new system remains viable.

While the STRIVE Act has not received universal support (McCook), it seems to have fared better than the Senate proposal, Secure Borders, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Reform Act of 2007. La Raza has concerns about the Senate compromise because of the temporary worker provisions, elimination of family preference, and the employment verification system. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) has similar concerns.

In June, 2007 WebJunction sponsored the program “Effectively Dealing with Anti-Immigrant Sentiment,” which focused on how libraries can create effective strategies for ensuring access to information to all people in their communities. Advocacy, federal legislation, issues and options for academic, public, and school libraries were addressed.

Taken together the resolutions, toolkits and seminars developed by librarians are important components that will assist library workers in protecting the human rights of immigrants. What does it mean, as stated in the 2005 Progressive Librarians Guild “Resolution against Anti-Immigrant Legislation,” to be an “advocate for the education of undocumented immigrants about their human rights?”

1. It is the responsibility of library workers to provide current and up-to-date information about the legislative progress of various bills and laws that will have an impact on the lives of immigrants.
2. It is the responsibility of library workers to provide current information about political actions intended to improve the opportunities for immigrants to participate fully in the life of the nation where they live.
3. It is the responsibility of librarians to take stands and develop tools that enable immigrants to realize full human rights.

As we carry on with our work as librarians, we should keep in mind our history of human rights advocacy, and note the work we do today is a continuation of the commitment to the contributions of our programs, collections and services towards keeping an open society, a public space where democracy lives (Phenix). This year will be a year of much struggle for immigrants rights. Librarians must help with information and advocacy.

#### Notes

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- "Secure Borders, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Reform Act of 2007," website of Senator Edward Kennedy. <http://kennedy.senate.gov/>
- STRIVE Act [Security through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy] 2007. Text of the 697 page bill is available at the Immigration Portal. <http://www.ilw.com/immigdaily/news/2007,0327-hr1645.pdf>
- Ya es hora ¡Ciudadanía! <http://www.yaeshora.info/>
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