



# Climate of Fear Takes Toll on Community

BISHOP JOE S. VASQUEZ

**E**xecutive orders introduced in January 2017 related to immigrants and refugees changed certain government policies. Although not all the proposed changes have been fully implemented, their introduction has contributed to a climate of fear in immigrant and refugee communities. Simply put: The immigrant and the refugee are afraid of what will happen to them and their families. This fear is taking a toll on their daily lives, particularly the 11 million undocumented persons who live in our country.

In the aftermath of the executive orders, there has been intense media scrutiny on immigration enforcement efforts at both the state and federal levels. A tangible consequence of such daily attention has been an increase in community apprehension and fear and an occasional decrease in meaningful participation in daily life.

As the bishop of Austin in Texas, I can speak personally to my experience in Central Texas and the impact these executive orders have had on our migrant communities. I have met with families who are very concerned for their children. Some have said their children have cried because they are afraid that when they return home from school, their parents will be gone. Parents sometimes take two vehicles to the same location, so if one parent is detained, the other will be left to take care of the children. Several of my pastors have reported that attendance at Masses has decreased because of parishioners' concerns that they might be stopped, detained and eventually deported.

Another harmful effect has been on the ability and willingness of immigrants to access health care. In the last few months, we have seen reports of an increase in the number of immigrants and refugees not going to their medical appointments or checkups due to the fear they might encounter immigration enforcement officials in the process.

Certainly transportation and other access issues, scheduling and cost inhibit migrants from receiving medical services. But, there also is a palpable fear for many undocumented adults that they will be apprehended and separated from their children because of a chance encounter with immigration enforcement. This is an issue of concern to the church, as access to health care is an essential right for all — adults, children, the elderly and the unborn.

I firmly believe the health and safety of all community members should be paramount. For this reason, it is important to discuss briefly what existing community safety protections exist for medical providers and community members. Medical centers, like schools and houses of wor-

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ship, are currently treated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as “sensitive locations” — places where immigration enforcement cannot enter to apprehend individuals, absent extreme exigent circumstances. This is an important policy that DHS put into place in 2011. As health care providers and community leaders, it is vital that you understand this policy.<sup>1,2</sup>

Given its importance, we are working to educate the public, and particularly the Catholic faithful, about sensitive locations, but we also need your help. You can play an indispensable role by informing and educating the community you serve about this policy. Health care providers also have the responsibility to correct rumors and misinformation that can fuel the fear leading to lower attendance at medical centers by immigrants and refugees.

For example, there have been claims that immigration enforcement officials are roaming the halls of hospitals. While such claims have not been proven true, the rumor that this is occurring could contribute to an increase in fear among migrant populations and, ultimately, their failure to attend medical appointments. It is important to dispel such rumors and encourage individuals to receive medical care.

There also are concerns about access to services and how people will get the treatment they need. This is not just an issue for immigrants, but for all U.S. citizens. For example, there are many children of U.S. citizens who have undocumented parents and are not receiving the care they need because their parents are afraid to leave the house. Also, in some cases, immigrants who work as caretakers are in fear of being stopped and are not able to take their patients to potentially life-saving appointments.<sup>3</sup>

The United States is a nation with a rich immigrant tradition. The Catholic Church holds welcoming the newcomer and protecting the vulnerable as important tenets of our faith. We must make sure that our values, both as Catholics and Americans, are reflected in how we serve those in need.

In response to the executive order on refugee resettlement, I wrote, “The U.S. Catholic Bishops have long recognized the importance of ensuring public safety and would welcome reasonable and necessary steps to accomplish that goal...” Inte-

gral to public safety are issues related to public health. Nobody in this country should ever be afraid to go to the doctor for fear of deportation. We need to ensure that we are doing everything we can to provide health services to those in need, regardless of immigration status.

It is within our Catholic social teachings that we look to health care as a right that should be afforded to everyone. Speaking to an audience of more than 9,000 people associated with the organization Doctors with Africa, Pope Francis reiterated this point, declaring that “health is not a consumer good, but rather a universal right, and therefore access to health care services cannot be a privilege.”<sup>4</sup>

Being able to go to the doctor should not be reduced to the privilege of a few and granted only to those who can afford it or who possess the proper status. Instead, the church recognizes the rights of everyone to have access to what is most necessary for sustaining human life — including health care — while simultaneously insisting that responsibility falls on everyone to care properly for his or her own health.

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#### NOTES

1. Justice for Immigrants, “Enforcement on Sensitive Locations Webinar.” <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/news/enforcement-sensitive-locations-webinar/>.
2. Justice for Immigrants, “Sensitive Locations FAQ.” <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/what-we-are-working-on/immigration/sensitive-locations-faq/>.
3. Ike Swetlitz, “Immigrants, Fearing Trump’s Deportation Policies, Avoid Doctor Visits,” *PBS Newshour* blog item, Feb. 25, 2017, reproduced by permission from STAT. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/immigrants-trump-deportation-doctor/>.
4. Holy See Press Office, “Health Is a Universal Right, and Access to Healthcare Services Cannot Be a Privilege, Says the Pope to the Members of Doctors with Africa (CUAMM),” news release, May 7, 2016. <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/05/07/160507c.html>.

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