

How Much Is That Strawberry in the Window?

by Linda Thom

Immigration reform has been blocked by the fact that Republicans like cheap labor and Democrats like cheap votes. But just how cheap are immigrant votes and immigrant labor?

Answer: Not very.

On July 26th, Feliciano Morelos, a 19-year-old Mixtec from Oaxaca, Mexico, was sentenced to two months jail time in Santa Maria, California. This illiterate strawberry picker, who speaks neither English nor Spanish, refuses to take his tuberculosis medication. He has run away from two hospitals.

According to Santa Barbara County health officials, Mr. Morelos infected 56 people in the past year and nine still have active TB. Most of these people are relatives of Morelos and, therefore, are likely to be poor, illiterate and Mixteco-speakers, like Morelos.

Taxpayers of Santa Barbara County foot the bill for treatment of Morelos' victims because under state law, counties must provide health care to all comers regardless of ability to pay and regardless of immigration status.

According to local news reports (*Santa Barbara News-Press*, "S.M. farmworker in jail for length of TB treatment," July 27, 2004, Melinda Burns [Pay Archive]), public health nurses supervise the treatment of the 56 people Mr. Morelos infected. But be sure that these nurses do not speak Mixteco.

So aides who speak Mixteco and Spanish and Spanish and English must accompany the nurses. These

treatments cost a bundle.

Bottom line: In addition to health costs, jailing Morelos, his trial, his interpreters, and his one-year probation will cost Santa Barbara County taxpayers thousands of dollars.

Mr. Morelos may be the extreme in refusing treatment. But he is one of many immigrants with tuberculosis. According to the Center for Disease Control, over 3,000 cases of active TB were reported in California in 2003. Three quarters of these cases were immigrants.

Peggy Langle, Santa Barbara County Public Health Director, stated in the *Santa Barbara News-Press*, "There's no funding in the federal budget; there's no one to get a grant from. It's shocking. Tuberculosis is such a growing problem."

These medical and criminal justice expenses should be counted in the cost of the strawberries Mr. Morelos picked.

"Cheap labor" is really mighty expensive.

And, ultimately, cheap votes will be even worse.

Linda Thom is a retiree who fled California several years ago. She formerly worked as an officer for a major bank and as a budget analyst for the County Administrator of Santa Barbara. This column is reprinted from www.VDare.com.