

Mind-Changing Immigration Moments

New understandings for a California budget analyst

by Linda Thom

After almost 20 years working for a California county, I retired from my job as a budget analyst in the County Administrator's Office.

I retired early because I could see no end to California's budget problems. Although the stock market craziness generated tax revenue at the end of the decade and paid the rising costs of education, welfare and health care, the bust followed the boom. Tax revenue plummeted. Costs continued to rise.

In less than 10 words, California's biggest budget problem is Third World immigrants with lots of children.

Income tax is the largest source of revenue for the state, but:

- Residents who earn less than \$20,000 per year pay only 2 to 3 percent of all income taxes collected.

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- A child in school costs on average \$7,000 per year and the state picks up most of the tab.

- During the 1990s, immigrant women accounted for 45 percent of births (and keep in mind that immigrants also have foreign-born children in California schools).

- Currently, Hispanic women give birth to more than three children per woman. One can easily see that 3 times \$7,000 per year for education costs is more than most Hispanic immigrants earn in a year.

Immigrants do not pay their way. And although it's really pretty easy to understand for someone as smart as The Terminator (or Governor of California as it were), no one is talking about it. Education is the big ticket item but immigration nickels and dimes public coffers in ways that taxpayers cannot even imagine.

Even university "authorities" on the subject make fools of themselves. For example, some time ago, I heard a University of Michigan scholar on National Public Radio. The discussion on NPR centered around the 40-year anniversary of the War on Poverty. The "authority" noted that the only success of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty was the decrease in

elderly poor people caused by the Social Security program. (Honest, he really said that.) Otherwise, the poverty rate remains unchanged.

Did anyone mention that importing legions of unskilled immigrants defeated the War on Poverty? Nope.

As a budget analyst, I had no great epiphany on immigration. The knowledge came in little dribbles that I call "immigration moments."

Some of the more interesting immigration moments:

- In 1989, a big outbreak of measles occurred in Santa Barbara County schools. Beth, my 17-year-old daughter, needed a measles booster, as did her high school peers. Children who entered in kindergarten presented proof of shots but sadly, older children who entered school from outside the district did not.

Dr. Alan Chovil, the county's head of epidemiology, told me that we had to purchase MMR vaccine and hire additional, Spanish-speaking nurses and health aides. Of course, the county had not budgeted for special booster clinics, nurses and health aides.

- Then a BIG story hit the papers. A Mexican woman, in the country less than a week, goes to Marian Medical Center in Santa Maria. She

has late-stage TB and is saved...and that's the good news. The bad news: she is an illegal alien who lives with 17 people, including children, in an apartment – and doesn't speak Spanish let alone English.

Dr. Chovil tells me we must hire health aides who speak Spanish and Mixteco. (Yes, that is apparently a language.)

The aides would travel with the public health nurses to try to reach everyone the woman had come in contact with. They don't want to be contacted by the friendly government nurses, because they are often illegal aliens.

None of this is in the budget, of course.

- In the early 1990s, Dr. Chovil advised me that a TB epidemic existed in the county. I asked if they were illegal aliens. Apparently, most of them were legal, Filipino immigrants, who had latent TB which probably became active because of the stress associated with immigrating. Moreover, the TB spread into the AIDS community.

Of course, we had not budgeted for a TB epidemic.

- The same year, Dr. Chovil, the bearer of bad news, told me that all public health employees and jail personnel must take a hepatitis prevention regimen because of exposure to the disease.

Where did this come from? Yes, immigration – mostly from Mexico and Central America.

How many kinds of hepatitis are there? A, B, C, and now a D, I think.

- Starting in the 1970's, Santa Barbara County experienced a

baby boom in the agricultural north. Then and now, the mothers speak Spanish and do not have health insurance. Picking strawberries does not come with health benefits.

The mothers do not qualify for Medi-Cal (Medicaid) and are euphemistically called "self-pay patients." As minimum-wage strawberry pickers are poor, they do not pay. Under state law, the county must provide service regardless of immigration status or ability to pay – more properly, inability to pay.

- In the late 1980s, the Federal Government began paying for baby deliveries for legal and illegal immigrants, But it did not, and still does not, cover pre-natal or any other kind of care, except in cases of emergency.

Uncompensated care, therefore, continues to be a big issue for health care providers.

- In the 1990s, a group of north county doctors and Marion Hospital officials approached the county and asked that the County Government pay for all the poor people coming into the hospital and to the doctors' offices.

The head of Health Care Services and I told them that the county was not responsible for their bad debt.

- Then came the strawberry growers: they wanted the County to build low-cost housing for their farm workers. (I know it's hard to believe, but I swear that I'm not joking about this).

- In the early 1990s the administrator for health services told me that we had to redo our patient-records-filing system. We

used to keep files by name and social security number. But, interestingly enough, there were 30 Maria Gonzalez's, for example – and they all had the same social security numbers. They ranged in age from infants to grandmothers.

Once again, I am not joking.

- Every year I sat on the management side of the bargaining table in the county's labor negotiations. As I crunched the numbers and wrote tentative agreements for signature, I took little part in the discussions at the table. Sometimes, to try to understand the union members' demands, I asked questions.

One year, the eligibility workers who interview welfare applicants wanted an increase in their bilingual allowance. They said that the Spanish-speaking caseload standards were the same as the English-case load standards and that wasn't fair.

The obvious question – why wasn't it fair?

Answer: it takes longer to help the Spanish-speaking applicants.

My suggested solution: translate all forms into Spanish.

Answer: All forms are in Spanish.

My question: So why does it take longer to process Spanish-speaking clients?

Answer: They are unsophisticated and don't know the ways of American bureaucracy.

Now, I am really confused. I tell them that I don't understand. I'm not opposed to an increase in bilingual allowance, but I just don't get it – most welfare recipients are not very sophisticated. Half the

population has an IQ lower than 100 and the lower half is not feigning their slow thinking.

As I had known most of the eligibility workers for years, they decided to trust me and tell me the real reason. Many of the Spanish-speaking clients are just that. They only *speak* Spanish – they don't read or write it.

I also asked: why were so many immigrants receiving welfare? I thought they weren't eligible.

Answer: only U.S. citizens get welfare. My question: Then who are these U.S. citizens who cannot read or write Spanish, let alone English?

Answer: They don't get welfare. Their U.S.-born children do.

At the time, the "child-only" cases made up 45 percent of the increased caseload in the county. We can assume the children shared their benefits with their parents.

- In 1986, I attended a local seminar on the legal documentation required for new hires. The human resources director for a large resort hotel told me that he didn't know how many illegal aliens they had hired, but that it helped the bottom line.

I expected to hear about paying slave wages. But no, that wasn't it. Illegal aliens are not eligible for unemployment insurance. So when they are laid off after the summer season and the Christmas holidays, they don't apply for benefits.

As employers' rates varied from 3 to 7 percent of payroll depending on claims filed, employers could save 4 percent of payroll by hiring illegal aliens for temporary jobs.

I don't know what current rates are but the scam is the same and it results in a big financial reward for hiring illegal aliens.

- Speaking of tax scams, in the 1990s I was reviewing a table from the California Franchise Tax Board that collects state income taxes. I noted that on 1990 state income taxes filed in Imperial County, just east of San Diego, there were more tax filers, joint filers and dependents than there were people counted in the 1990 census.

I forget how many more but it was thousands, maybe 70,000. I called the state and was told that filers can claim dependents that live in Mexico or Canada. (Also, at the time, California gave a renters' tax credit and so the filers were getting money back from the state, not paying taxes.)

The Federal Government also allows tax filers to claim Mexican dependents. Do you suppose the IRS checks to make sure that all the dependents are real people?

If President Bush's guest worker proposal becomes law, will guest workers be able to claim the Earned Income Tax Credit by claiming dependents that live in Mexico?

(This is what retired budget analysts think about in their free time.)

As the possibility exists that these immigration moments have made you grumpy, I choose to share a lighter moment.

In 1997, I was on a federal jury in Los Angeles. The Mexican plaintiffs did not speak English, so a translator interpreted throughout the trial.

The jurors couldn't understand why the Mexican plaintiffs' son who died was buried in Michigan. I explained that he was buried in Michoacan.

During jury deliberations, one of the jurors who had recently moved from Iowa asked why the plaintiffs did not bring in their checks to show their costs.

I told her that the plaintiffs could not read or write so they didn't have checkbooks.

None of the other jurors had noticed that the plaintiffs could not spell their names when they were sworn in.

Twenty-five years ago, without my immigration moments, I would have been just as confused as my fellow jurors.

Outside Occupied America, Americans have a hard time comprehending all the ways that immigration makes our lives more complicated – and more expensive.

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