

Grassroots Reform Groups Discuss Goals

Reportage by Joseph Daleiden

Representatives of grassroots immigration reform organizations from twelve states met in Chicago April 3, 1997, to discuss goals and strategies. One of the primary challenges faced by activist groups around the country is education, the delegates agreed. Except for persons located in the border states where the pressure on social services, schools, employment and culture is more evident, the American public is still largely ignorant of the severe negative consequences of the nation's present immigration policies.

The polls show that the vast majority of Americans favor reducing immigration, but only about 25 percent of the public ranks excessive immigration as a primary concern. Ironically, none of the issues that are rated above immigration — education, income inequality, crime, the environment, etc. — can be successfully resolved unless immigration is reduced to a sustainable level.

Assuming that the federal government could successfully close down illegal immigration, just what level of legal immigration could be construed as "sustainable" was the subject of much debate at the meeting. The majority of the conferees argued for a goal of 100,000 per year. The optimum number that some representatives could accept was 300,000, and these figures cover all categories including refugees and asylum-seekers. Even 300,000, which is somewhere near the long-term average, is far below the present level of 1.2 to 1.5 million legal and illegal immigrants entering the U.S. each year.

In addition to the adoption of this suggested cap, several other goals were generally endorsed by the conference participants:

- implementation of significant employer sanctions and a work-eligibility verification system to halt the continued invasion of illegals.
- limitation of family reunification to spouses and underage children.
- elimination of automatic citizenship at birth to children whose parents are not U.S. citizens or permanent legal aliens. (This is the intent of HR 7 introduced by Rep. Brian Bilbray.)
- re-establishment of the traditional definition of refugees and asylees as those who are in imminent danger of death or persecution due to their political views. Refugee status would not be granted to persons who wish to leave their home country to avoid coercive laws regarding sexual practices or birth control, nor to victims of diseases such as AIDS, or economic deprivation, or the hundred other reasons why most of the world would benefit from migrating to the United States.
- maintenance of a policy of repatriation of refugees when the danger that brought them here has passed.

The conferees also felt that more effort must be expended at both the national and local levels to build coalitions with other groups who still do not realize how they are being adversely affected by the present level of immigration. These would include any organizations concerned with protecting the environment,, reducing taxes and balancing budgets, reversing the decline in real wages, reducing the incidence of drug abuse and crime, improving race and ethnic relations, and renewing the meaning of citizenship in America.

Finally it was agreed to continue to build a coalition of grassroots organizations to provide the synergies that can be gained by coordinating their efforts. Although wide latitude in tactics would be allowed, the members of the coalition agreed not to condone racism or violence in pursuit of their goals, not to accept as members any persons or groups advocating racism or violence. **TSC**

Joseph Daleiden is executive director of the Midwest Coalition to Reform Immigration, host of the April 3, 1997 meeting.