

New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops



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Letter to the Editor:

LICENSES FOR ALL DRIVERS: A MATTER OF MERCY, FAIRNESS, AND SAFETY

A Statement by the Roman Catholic Bishops of New Mexico

We, the Roman Catholic Bishops of New Mexico who are the spiritual leaders of over half of our state's population, are obliged to inform and educate our church's members and the public about issues of moral concern and social justice as seen through the eyes of the Catholic faith. It is in this regard that we address an important contemporary issue facing our state and nation: the treatment of migrants in our society, including those laws and public policies that directly impact the justice and dignity experienced by *all* residents of the State of New Mexico.

We strongly support the positive impact that immigrants have made in our state and nation while, at the same time, we recognize the right of our country to regulate its own borders and to control international immigration. Those controls, however, should be influenced by a sense of justice and mercy in light of the God-given right of people to migrate when faced with grave social or economic dangers. It is always important to remember that the United States was founded by a broad collection of immigrants who fled their country of origin seeking a better life. This idea of seeking a better life has been, and always will be, a part of our national identity.

We support extending driver license privileges only to residents of the state. We are in favor of allowing individuals without Social Security numbers to obtain licenses provided that they present other acceptable forms of identification, such as a valid passport, consular identification card, or other recognized government-issued documents, currently required by present law. The present law when enforced addresses the issue of fraudulent documents. We have, in the past, called for a compromise that can strengthen the law and yet issue drivers licenses. We continue to call on the Legislature and the Governor to work diligently on a compromise. We believe that this is in the interest of *all* New Mexicans, and our rationale for this position is as follows:

- Licenses for *all* drivers make our highways safer, since unlicensed drivers have not been tested and, therefore, present a potential danger to everyone using our roads. In addition, un-licensed drivers tend to raise everyone's insurance rates since the former cannot obtain auto insurance.
- Licensed drivers make our communities safer because they are more easily identified and tracked. If a law enforcement officer stops an unlicensed driver, that individual might easily give a false name. Such names would not be found in the state's database, thus undermining law enforcement's efforts to determine whether there are outstanding warrants or other matters related to the person in question.
- Repeal of the current driver license law would detract from limited state resources at a time of economic crisis. We want our law enforcement and court resources focused on the apprehension of dangerous criminals, rather than on the detention of normally hard-working immigrants.
- And, finally, without legal access to driver licenses, immigrant workers would not be able to travel to their places of employment, undermining the economic stability of their families as well as the many New Mexico businesses, farms, and ranches that depend on their labor.

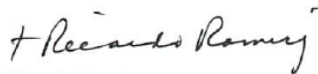
We understand that many people are frustrated at the current state of affairs surrounding immigration in our state and nation. Ultimately, however, the issue of immigration reform is of enormous importance. The principal driving force behind the vast majority of undocumented immigrants' presence in the State of New Mexico, and elsewhere, resides in a chronic lack of legal visas available under our current immigration system. With a total of only 5,000 permanent visas offered to unskilled laborers for legal entry into the United States, it is clear why as many as 300,000 undocumented people each year are absorbed into our nation's workforce. Comprehensive immigration reform would replace illegality with a system based on legal presence and legal entry. This would restore the rule of law to a chaotic system while protecting the basic dignity and lives of our fellow brothers and sisters, as well as preserving the dignity of the rule of law.

Not to be confused with a system of "amnesty," this type of immigration reform would require those who have broken the law to earn their legal status by paying a fine, paying taxes, learning English, and waiting at the back of a long line to have the opportunity of becoming a United States citizen.

Therefore, the Roman Catholic Bishops of New Mexico endorse state-enacted policies that would permit migrants to become full members of their communities and our nation. And in that way, all New Mexicans can continue to benefit from their contributions without sacrificing our long-held values as a nation of immigrants: freedom, fairness, and opportunity.



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