Democracy Summer Continues the Campaign for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

In Kansas and around the country, immigrants and their allies have declared 2006 the year of “Democracy Summer” and have launched dozens of events to promote citizenship and civic engagement and continue the pressure for realistic, humane, and comprehensive immigration reforms. This has become particularly critical as anti-immigrant voices have ratcheted up their rhetoric, sending bricks to Congressional offices, taking donations to build a wall along the border, and weighing in during the hearings held by House committees around the country. El Centro, Inc., as partners in the New American Opportunity Campaign, is playing an active role in these efforts. Following the unprecedented mass mobilizations for immigrant rights in March, April, and May of 2006, El Centro’s Democracy Summer events have included a forum to educate immigrants about the Congressional debate on immigration and how it could affect them; voter registration in Kansas City and in partnership with organizations in Dodge City, Garden City, Liberal, Topeka, Emporia, and Salina; a citizenship workshop on July 22 to help Lawful Permanent Residents fill out their citizenship paperwork free of charge; grassroots actions to send work gloves and messages to members of Congress whose support we need on immigration reform; an immigrant family photo project to document the impact of our broken immigration laws on American families; and a community celebration of the growing power of immigrants in the electoral context. Other activities include an essay contest entitled “Why I want to be a U.S. citizen,” with the winners receiving $400 scholarships to cover their naturalization fee, creation of bilingual voter guides using El Centro’s candidate surveys, letters to the editor supporting comprehensive immigration reform in several papers around the state, and some bi-state efforts in partnership with allies in Missouri (see p. 2 for more details). Democracy Summer activities will continue through September. If you are interested in helping with voter registration, grassroots mobilizations, contacts to members of Congress, or other related events, please contact El Centro, Inc. (see p. 4 for details).

To support comprehensive immigration reform:
- Contact your member of Congress to encourage him/her to support comprehensive immigration reform and (especially important for House members) to oppose anti-immigrant and enforcement-only amendments in the Appropriations process.

Visit El Centro’s website at www.elcentroinc.com to follow the link to register to vote!
Immigration Takes Center Stage in Missouri Legislature, and El Centro Lends a Hand

Since initiating our policy advocacy and research efforts in earnest in 2002, El Centro, Inc. has focused on localities, the state of Kansas, and our Kansas Congressional delegation as our best avenues for influencing policy change. We have, of course, always been dedicated to those issues which most closely reflect the agency’s mission and which have the greatest potential to positively impact the lives of the families we serve. Particularly during the past two years, immigration policy and issues that directly affect immigrant families have taken increased precedence, given their rising prominence at all levels of government. During 2006, the Missouri Legislature considered several bills related to immigrants, including some that were so concerning to us, as neighbors, that we began to explore options to influence the Missouri Legislature, even from our position in Kansas. During the 2006 session, we primarily weighed in on a set of bills, SB1250 and HB1864, both of which would have barred an undocumented high school graduate from enrolling (even at out-of-state tuition prices) in a Missouri public postsecondary educational institution. In fact, all such institutions would have had to certify to the Missouri Legislature that they had no undocumented students enrolled as a part of receiving funds each year. We helped advocates on the Missouri side to create talking points, connected legislators to legal experts who could refute the claims of some that federal law already prohibited such enrollment, helped some students and educators to craft testimony in opposition to these bills, and communicated directly with some lawmakers who were confused and frustrated by the lack of clear advocacy and information on this issue. We also helped to create talking points and build a strategy around two other bills, one denying most public benefits to undocumented immigrants and one authorizing the Missouri Highway Patrol to enforce federal immigration laws. None of these bills were passed during the 2006 legislative session, but an interim committee was established to consider all of these issues and ‘immigration reform’ and to make recommendations to the 2007 Missouri Legislature. When this committee announced that it would hold hearings around the state this summer, El Centro, Inc. lent our policy expertise to help Kansas City, Missouri-based advocates to develop their testimonies, strategize a lineup of conferees, and analyze the alternative approaches proposed by the legislature. We organized briefings to prepare those who would give testimony, prepared fact sheets and talking points, and also conducted a conference call with advocates from St. Louis who requested assistance in preparing for their August 10, 2006 hearing. The tone and tenor of the debate during the June 29, 2006 hearing in Kansas City made it clear that issues related to immigration will continue to dominate in the Missouri Legislature. We know that there is an urgent need for more advocacy in Jefferson City to promote pro-immigrant approaches to the current challenges, organizing around the state to build allies, and capacity-building for Missouri-based organizations to enhance their legislative effectiveness. We will be looking for additional resources and new strategies as we take on this new challenge, in partnership with our Missouri friends!

To support immigrant rights in Missouri:
- Contact your Missouri legislator to ask him/her to oppose the anti-immigrant bills
- Sign up for the Missouri Immigrant Action listserv by emailing subscribe_MOImmigrantActionNetwork@yahooogroups.com

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Looking Ahead to the 2007 Kansas Legislative Session

It may be only August, and most of us may be more focused on summer vacations and strategies for keeping cool, but, at El Centro, it’s also time to start looking ahead to the next legislative session! While our Board of Directors will not approve our full legislative agenda for 2007 until late 2006, we have already begun research and message development on some of the issues that we know will be priorities. In addition to the issues outlined below, we will of course continue to take action on issues consistent with our mission, likely to include action on the Kansas and U.S. budgets, especially as they relate to social services, protection of the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the discussion of school finance in Kansas, relating to Limited English Proficient and at-risk children.

Our biggest state priorities for 2007 are anticipated to be:

REAL ID Act
The REAL ID Act creates strict national standards for driver’s licenses, requires verification of documents, significantly raises issuance cost, forbids some lawful immigrants from obtaining a license, and bars all undocumented immigrants. We have great concerns about the implementation of this legislation, both on immigrants and on other vulnerable populations, including older adults, victims of domestic violence, and religious minorities.

Voter identification restrictions
Across the nation, legislation restricting the types of identification that can be used to verify identity, as well as additional requirements for verification of citizenship, has become the top priority for anti-immigrant groups, who allege that undocumented immigrants are fraudulently voting in U.S. elections. In the states with such provisions, the greatest negative impact has been seen on low-income voters, particularly the elderly and minorities, who often have difficulty locating original birth certificates and who may not have (or be able to afford) a state-issued photo identification card. We will work to oppose such restrictions in Kansas while working with the Secretary of State and others to promote civic participation in an orderly, fair, and transparent system.

Continued defense of instate tuition for immigrant students
We anticipate additional attacks on Kansas’ instate tuition policy (HB2145), although our defense of this commonsense law, which is working well for our state, will hopefully not occupy as much of our efforts in the 2007 session as in 2006.

Attacks on immigrants’ eligibility for public benefits
Towards the end of the 2006 session, there were hearings and some effort to pass legislation that would, for the most part, clarify that undocumented immigrants are already ineligible for most state and locally-funded public benefits. Our concerns with this legislation, then, center not on its impact on undocumented immigrants but rather on U.S. citizen children in immigrant families, who may not receive necessary services due to their family’s fears about immigration consequences. Additionally, there are concerning provisions allowing lawsuits to be filed by individuals who believe that localities or the state are violating these restrictions and uncertainty about how the additional costs involved in following the verification procedures would be covered. It is unnecessary and potentially harmful legislation, and we will continue to oppose it.

Consumer protections within open-end credit transactions
Currently, there are no interest rate caps on open-end credit, including car title loans, or on consumer credit sales, where there is both a loan and a sales transaction involved. There is concern that these loopholes in our lending regulations are exploited to consumers’ disadvantage, and that less financially savvy consumers are particularly vulnerable. Legislation that established reasonable rate caps on these types of transactions would standardize the lending industry and protect consumers.

Language minority rights, particularly in health care
We will oppose any English-only legislation in Kansas and work to promote adequate resources for high-quality interpreters, multilingual health information, and training multilingual personnel.
El Centro, Inc. faces ever-increasing challenges in our policy and advocacy work as we struggle to make progress in a climate of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment, tight fiscal limitations, and a polarized political environment. We need to work harder, and smarter, every day in order to continue to move forward, and we need your help to make that possible.

As we continue to work to bring diverse voices into the democratic process, we continually look for new partners and new opportunities to seek justice, create opportunity, and make change. This update summarizes recent legislative action on key priorities and makes recommendations for how you can make your voice heard. If you have questions about any of these issues, are willing to volunteer, or would like to make a financial or in-kind contribution to El Centro’s advocacy work, please contact Melinda Lewis at 913.677.0100 x.212 or mlewis@elcentroinc.com. We can use all varieties of skills and interest levels, including clerical help, letter-writing, people to search papers for media coverage, etc... We will find a place where you can make a difference! Thank you!

Mark Your Calendars—Baile por la Justicia December 1, 2006

El Centro, Inc. is planning our second annual Baile por la Justicia (Dance for Justice) on Friday, December 1, 2006. This special event raises money for El Centro’s work in the campaign for comprehensive immigration reform and immigrant rights. We have an ambitious fundraising goal of more than $15,000, and we will need YOUR help to make that a reality. To find out how you can volunteer to sell tickets, help with promotion, or help the day of the event, contact Melinda Lewis. And look for more information, coming soon, about the bands who will be participating and our wonderful sponsors!

YOU—Partner in El Centro’s Advocacy Work

El Centro volunteers help with voter registration at a community festival.

Soon-to-be-U.S. citizens fill out their paperwork as they wait to meet with attorneys volunteering their time for El Centro, Inc’s citizenship workday on July 22, 2006.