

Cheryl Aguilar, LICSW, Mental Health Therapist, La Clínica del Pueblo

Testimony

The Sense of the Council Regarding Federal Immigration Raids Resolution Hearing

November 17, 2016

Good afternoon distinguished Council Members. Thank you for providing me with opportunity to testify today. My name is Cheryl Aguilar and I am a licensed clinical social worker at La Clinica del Pueblo, a community based clinic with a 33-year-old history of providing health care to DC Latino and immigrant families. I am also representing the National Association of Social Workers DC chapter as a board member, with a membership of over 1200 DC metro area social workers and a national membership of over 120,000 members. NASW DC Metro Chapter leadership support and affirm the message I am providing today. And I am a proud Ward 1 DC resident.

I am here in support of The Sense of the Council Regarding Federal Immigration Raids Resolution and to urge you to continue safeguarding our District's immigrant families. Thank you Councilwoman Brianne Nadeau for introducing this important resolution that can bring safety, health and hope to thousands of DC families.

At La Clinica, I have the distinct honor to provide individual and group mental health therapy to children, teens and adults. Through this work, I see firsthand the dire impact immigration raids and deportations have on an individual's and families' mental health and overall wellbeing. Whether is a child scared that his mommy or daddy will not be home when he comes back from school or a mother in despair because she may be separated from her children, the pain our community is suffering is real and it prevents them from living the quality of life that DC residents deserve.

Just last week, a group of 10 children between 6 and 12 who are part of a psychoeducational mental health group for DC immigrant families, verbalized their fears over elections outcome and potential deportations. As I started my group with the usual greeting of How Are you Today? a 9-year-old opened up with **"I am sad because the new President doesn't like immigrants and we may go away."** A recently arrived 11-year-old that fled El Salvador due to growing gang violence and was reunited with his mom, he had been separated from for years, is scared he may once again be separated from his loved ones. He drew a picture of President elect telling people "Here comes ICE." Another girl pleaded "Please be nice to us."

Under the leadership of new administration that has vocalized intentions to increase deportations, the District of Columbia has a unique opportunity to continue its history of protecting its residents and showing immigrants it has their back.

Our children's job is to go to school, get good grades, play, make friends and live a healthy and happy life. **Instead many immigrant children are carrying big worries on their shoulders that lead to a variety of behavioral changes** affecting their health including: sadness, making them isolate themselves from friends, feeling hopeless about the future that may impact their grades at school, experiencing lower self-esteem, experiencing frustration that may manifest as defiance in school, often times ending in detention or suspensions rather than mental health support, fear which can lead to withdrawal, nightmares and hypervigilance leading to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, among many other challenges.

Some of the basic human needs that children must meet to thrive and develop into healthy adults are safety, a sense of belonging, self-actualization or the ability to achieve one's full potential. Without a sense of safety, kids grow up to feel insecure about themselves, the world and others. Without a sense of belonging, kids feel left out further impacting how they feel about themselves. And without sense of being able to achieve their dreams and goals, kids may feel discouraged to do their best.

But the fear our community is feeling is not new. These fears emerge during threats of deportations and enforcement and have now escalated due to the results of elections. During last year's nationwide ICE enforcement, including in the District, many of our clients were afraid to leave their house, go to school or work. Their symptoms once again escalated leading to depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

We as a community, you as council members, and together as some of adults kids depend on to thrive have the opportunity to help children in their endeavor by denouncing hateful and divisive rhetoric, creating safe spaces for community members and supporting programs that promote integration and mental health.

Last week I was touched by our children's ability to turn despair into hope. As we addressed fears about the unknown, the theme of hate towards immigrants prevailed. When I asked a 6-year-old girl what do we do to get rid of hate, she said: "You go to someone and you say, do you want to be my friend?"

This city council has the chance to continue standing by immigrants. Would you continue to be our friend?

Thank you for your time.

Catalina Sol, Chief Programs Officer, La Clínica del Pueblo

Testimony

The Sense of the Council Regarding Federal Immigration Raids Resolution Hearing

November 17, 2016

Good morning. My name is Catalina Sol and I am the Chief Programs Officer at La Clinica del Pueblo. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you, along with my colleague, in support of this resolution.

La Clinica is a community based clinic located in Columbia Heights. For almost 35 years, we have served low-income, Latino immigrants, primarily of Central American origin. We provide comprehensive health and mental health services, as well as community health promotion and language access services. We have a strong focus on services for the Latino LGBTQ community, survivors of violence, and families separated by migration, among others. For our patients and clients, the experience of being an immigrant is a significant social determinant affecting health and mental health, and immigration status has a profound impact on their wellbeing and health outcomes.

As a health clinic caring for immigrants, we oppose raids because they create an environment of fear among the entire immigrant community, and are detrimental to the health of our community. In January we issued a call from the health sector for our local leaders to affirm that our localities are safe spaces for immigrants and those fleeing violence (I've attached this with my testimony). We are therefore very pleased to testify on behalf of this resolution today.

This action is timely, to say the least, and needed now more than ever. Since November 9th, when the results of the presidential elections became known, our community has entered a state of extreme distress. **Not since 9-11 have we witnessed such widespread confusion and sense of personal threat.** You have heard from Cheryl about the impact on our children in particular. I'd like to share some additional information collected by our staff in the last week about the experience of our patients and clients on November 9th alone.

- **95% of patients seen for mental health services that day expressed fear and anxiety due to the election results.** At least 1 patient had reactivated PTSD, including flashbacks; and another with hallucinations expressed paranoia. Children expressed fear of going to school, and families of being separated and/or returning to violence.
- **In groups, Latino patients who were permanent residents and citizens also expressed fear that they would be discriminated because they "look Latino."**
- One medical patient asked if her health insurance would still work, as she purchased it through an exchange and needs it to support her cancer treatment. **Fear of losing**

access to health insurance and health services was echoed throughout the day and this week.

- **100% of participants in our Latino gay and transgender peer groups expressed feeling unsafe and rejected.**
- **30 persons reached by our outreach workers expressed fear of enrolling in the DC Alliance, and thought if they did so, their immigration information would be shared with authorities.**
- **One immigrant woman was advised by other immigrants in the room to avoid a court date for a domestic violence hearing, as she might be deported if she attended.**
- One patient riding a DC Metro bus was told by another passenger to speak in English; another reported being yelled at in the street and told “you will all be sent back soon”; **one of our Latino staff reported going to a DC bar and being told by other patrons to “go back to Mexico.”**
- There was no distinction between our patients who reside in the District versus those who live in other jurisdictions with regard to their sense of safety or the security of their health benefits and services.

I’d like to close emphasizing this last point. The District of Columbia has a long history of welcoming immigrants, and we are proud of our Mayor for affirming that. However, it is evident that our community needs this message to be louder and more widely disseminated than it is now, and that we need to hear concrete information about the safety of our spaces, services and benefits. Now more than ever we need our local leaders and agency heads to examine the current gaps in access and equity for immigrants, particularly those who are Limited English Proficient, and to close those gaps. Now more than ever we need our city’s mental health services to be widely available to immigrants, and for our health programs, including the DC Alliance, to be accessible and responsive to the language and life circumstances of immigrants. Thank you, and thank you Councilmember Nadeau for all your work on behalf of our community.