

SPOKANE

Idaho groups urge acceptance of immigrants

By **Betsy Z. Russell**
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November 14, 2007

BOISE - Human rights and religious groups are launching a "welcome the stranger" ad campaign, just as big immigration raids are hitting in southern Idaho.

From talk radio to the national debate over immigration, the groups said a "climate of fear and intolerance" is developing that's counter to basic Idaho and American values.

The campaign is starting with 10 bus-bench ads in the Boise area and a billboard that will go up between the cities of Burley and Jerome. Backers hope eventually to expand it statewide. The ads carry two messages: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me," a quote from the Bible; and "Immigration is an American experience. Acceptance is an American value."

The Rev. Thomas Faucher of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Boise said his parish includes people from all over the world, some of whom came to Idaho as refugees. Just in the last few weeks, he said, he's gained new parishioners from Burundi and Burma.

"We become better by welcoming them," Faucher said. "That's precisely what happened to my ancestors when they came from France, and when they came from Ireland, and when they came from Canada."

Sociology professor Robert McCarl of Boise State University said, "Opening our doors to welcome newcomers is a central narrative in our American experience."

But they said recent immigration raids in the Magic Valley, in which agents have reportedly raided homes, bus stops, a WinCo grocery store and more in search of undocumented immigrants, have combined with an increasingly vitriolic debate over immigration to create a climate that's unfriendly to newcomers.

"The current climate now around immigration raids does not reflect our values," said Antonina Robles, an Idaho Community Action Network member and recent Boise State University graduate from Caldwell. "It is a climate of fear."

The Twin Falls Times-News reported today that local residents are complaining of immigration officers stopping Hispanics at random and asking to see identification.

Alex Harrington, spokesman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection for the region, said his agents don't do that. "They do not profile," he said. "Their main concern is (to) look for individuals who are not supposed to be in our country, that's it."

Customs and Border Protection reported today that it has apprehended more than 100 illegal aliens in the Twin Falls area in the past week, and that a quarter of them had criminal histories, including five with felony arrests on their records. The agency said its sweep focused on bus



The Rev. Thomas Faucher of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Boise talks to the media today.

stations and included checks on 15 commercial buses. Asked about the reported raids at homes and elsewhere, Harrington said, "That is not us," but said it could be other law enforcement agencies. "We just don't know."

John Bechtel, mayor of Wilder, said he's no advocate for illegal immigration but believes all people should be treated with respect. In his city, he said, "Our population is 70 percent Hispanic, and we work hard to create a community where all can contribute." That can happen, he said, "without deteriorating into name-calling and put-downs."

Said Robles, "I don't want my neighbors, my family, my community members to be scared to go to Wal-Mart."

Amy Herzfeld, executive director of the Idaho Human Rights Education Center, said the "welcome the stranger" campaign will run for a year, funded by donations. It's modeled after similar campaigns in Tennessee and Iowa.