

Collier County Neighborhood Stories Project asks Rubio for immigration reform that keeps families together

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Bonita Springs resident Jorge Rodriguez never wants to be separated from his family again.

In June 2011, the 34-year-old Mexican native was stopped on Interstate 75 on his way to a remodeling job in Miami. When he couldn't provide documents showing legal status, he was taken by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to the Broward Transitional Center.

"Daddy, when are you going to come back?" his two young children would ask him on the phone.

After being detained there for two months, he was able to go home after paying a \$5,000 bond, but his immigration status remains in limbo.

Rodriguez joined a dozen other advocates of the Florida Immigrant Coalition's Say Yes to Citizenship campaign Thursday during a meeting with Sen. Marco Rubio's legislative aide, Zach Zampella, at Edison State College in Naples. Media was not allowed into the meeting.

"We need Sen. Rubio to be on board and say yes to an immigration reform that benefits our communities and our families," said Angela Cisneros, a volunteer with the Collier County Neighborhood Stories Project, at a press conference before the meeting.

"We not only want him to consider a real and reasonable path to citizenship but to push for a moratorium on deportations which would benefit the many currently detained who could qualify for eventual immigration reform."

The Collier County Sheriff's Office detained 2,956 individuals between fiscal year 2008 and the start of fiscal year 2012, according to case-by-case records obtained by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse through a Freedom of Information Act request. Of those, 2,034, or 69 percent, had not been convicted of a crime and 922 had.

In Lee County, 1,225 were detained. Of those, 835, or 68 percent, had no criminal record, and 390 did.

Grey Torrico, also with the Collier County Neighborhood Stories Project, said Rubio's aide did not address the request for a moratorium on deportations.

"We went in there knowing that a lot of the conversation was going to revolve around operational control of the border," Torrico said. "He did speak about this nebulous framework around citizenship. ... It doesn't seem like a really concrete laid-out plan."

Immokalee Dr. Juan Puerto sees children who have stopped smiling after a parent was deported. "They're depressed; they get behind in school," he said. "When you disrupt a family, you disrupt the basic unit of society."

Pastor Miguel Salvador, who runs La Mision Bethel Farmworker Ministry in Immokalee, doesn't want to see any more families torn apart. He said it's often the breadwinner who is deported.

"We just came here to work," said Maria Bautista, 28, of Naples, who attended with her two young daughters who were born in the United States, adding she and her husband don't drive for fear of being deported. "We don't want them to suffer like their parents have."