



1225 8th Street, Suite 590, Sacramento, CA 95814
Ph: 916.448.6762 Fax: 916.448.6774
www.caimmigrant.org

For Immediate Release

Contact: Reshma Shamasunder (CIPC) 213/241-0273
Andrea Guerrero (ACLU) 619/ 232-2121 Ext. 28
Pedro Rios (AFSC) 619/233-4114

November 2, 2007

Immigrant advocates, Faith Based, Legal Aid Groups Raise Voices In Defense of Immigrant Fire Victims in San Diego

Fifty organizations from around the state have signed on to a letter (see below) expressing concern about the apparent unequal treatment of immigrants during the evacuation and sheltering of residents forced to flee their homes by raging wildfires in San Diego last week.

The organizations are calling on the Governor, California legislators and Congressional leaders to investigate reported incidents of unequal treatment, denial of services, and discrimination based on appearance and language spoken against individuals who sought assistance. The incidents are detailed in a report released by San Diego organizations titled "Firestorm: Treatment of Vulnerable Populations During the San Diego Fires". A copy of the report and information about its authors are available at www.immigrantsandiego.org. Please also see "The State of Civil and Human Rights for Migrant Communities in San Diego County During the Firestorm of October 2007" by the American Friends Service Committee, <http://www.afsc.org/give/AFSC-Preliminary-Report-SD-Fires-FINAL.pdf>

There is growing evidence that a climate of fear now pervasive among immigrants who lost homes, property and jobs will prevent them from seeking resettlement assistance. The undersigned groups are urging disaster aid and relief agencies to provide information in various languages and help fire victims who are immigrants to secure the assistance they need to rebuild their lives.

Open Letter on Treatment of Immigrant Disaster Victims

We, the undersigned organizations, stand together with San Diego residents of all backgrounds who lost their homes or were forced to flee the raging fires. We applaud the colossal effort and risk of firefighters who battled the blazes to protect the lives and property of all San Diegans. We applaud the courageous individuals and organizations that worked tirelessly to provide victims with support and assistance, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

A Statewide Partnership of:
APALC Asian Pacific American Legal Center • **NILC** National Immigration Law Center • **CHIRLA** Coalition for Humane
Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles • **SIREN** Services Immigrant Rights & Education Network •

We cannot stand silent, however, in the face of what appeared to be unequal treatment of the immigrant community in certain areas and incidents that resulted in the deportation of an evacuated family during the crisis.

Last week, in the midst of the evacuations from the wildfires, which displaced more than half a million residents, local police and emergency service providers repeatedly asked evacuees to present identity documents, proof of lawful immigrant status, and evidence of evacuation from an evacuation zone before allowing evacuees to access emergency food, shelter, clothing, and water. Many evacuees who were not able to readily produce the requested documents were and continue to be denied emergency relief assistance.

The actions of local authorities run counter to their responsibility to assist everyone in safety and rescue efforts during a natural disaster. Displaced persons are often unable to take personal documentation with them and it is unreasonable and inhumane to demand immigration documents from evacuees in a fire disaster. In San Diego, this encouraged racial profiling and the questioning of individuals based on their appearance and language.

We call on the Governor, policymakers, relief agencies and community leaders to examine the events of last week and work towards state and local policies that protect all residents during a natural disaster. We oppose the collaboration of local police and immigration and border patrol agents for any purpose except to assist disaster victims during a natural disaster. Finally, we call on disaster relief agencies to reach out to frightened immigrant fire victims and provide them with the services they need, using linguistically and culturally appropriate methods, recognizing the high number of limited English proficient residents in the area.

Last week's detention and deportation of Latino community members has created great fear among immigrant communities, deterring them from utilizing key services that they need to survive. As evacuees re-enter their homes and rebuild their lives, relief agencies that provide disaster assistance must meet the needs of all fire victims and should suspend any policies that require fingerprinting or a check of immigration status.

We must establish disaster preparedness programs that gain the public's cooperation with authorities in order to protect life and property and ensure the speedy delivery of care and services to all victims. These programs cannot discriminate against any one community; to do so is immoral and is contrary to our values.

For more information about this letter, please contact Reshma Shamasunder with the California Immigrant Policy Center at 213-241-0273 or rshamasunder@caimmigrant.org.

(more, see signatories below)

<p>Fair Immigration Reform Movement Filipino American Service Group, Inc. Fuera Mundial Collaborative Community for Immigrant Rights Gente Unida International Institute of Los Angeles Jacksonville Florida MDS Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance, Los Angeles Korean Resource Center Law Center For Families Legal Services for Prisoners with Children Los Amigos of Orange County Love Sees No Borders Mujeres Unidas y Activas National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF) National Immigration Law Center National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC) PALS for Health San Diego Immigrant Rights Consortium Services, Immigrant Rights and Education Network Students for a Democratic Society-Movement for a Democratic Society, San Diego Chapter The East Bay La Raza Lawyers Association The International Institute of the Bay Area The Lambda Letters Project</p>	<p>American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) ACLU of San Diego & Imperial Counties ACLU of Southern California Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum Asian Law Caucus Asian Pacific American Legal Center Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition Border Angels California Church IMPACT California Council of Churches California Immigrant Policy Center California Pan-Ethnic Health Network California Partnership California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc California WIC Association CAMINOS – Pathways Learning Center Center for Community Change Centro La Familia Advocacy Chinese for Affirmative Action Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles East Bay Sanctuary Covenant Equal Justice Society Equal Rights Advocates, Inc. World Trust Educational Services, Inc Young Workers United Center for Social Advocacy Sweatshop Watch California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) California National Organization of Women</p>
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