

Tuition legislation helps immigrants

Michelle Martin/CNS

CHICAGO (CNS) — Sandy, a 19-year-old community college student, knows what she wants to do. She wants to go to a four-year college, then graduate school, and eventually work as a psychologist.

She graduated last year from Lane Tech College Prep in Chicago, but even with her two part-time jobs she has been unable to afford four-year college tuition.

Sandy, who asked that her last name not be used, came to Chicago from Morelos in southwestern Mexico 11 years ago, joining her parents, who had come several years before to work and make money for the family.

None of them has proper immigration documents, and, although her family has worked and paid taxes in Illinois for years, she was not eligible for in-state tuition rates at Illinois public universities.

But that changed May 18, when Gov. Rod Blagojevich signed the Access to Higher Education Act. With his signature, Illinois joined a growing roster of states — including California, New York, Utah, Washington, Oklahoma and Texas — who make undocumented students eligible for in-state tuition rates. Similar legislation also passed this year in Maryland but was vetoed by Gov. Robert Ehrlich Jr.

In Illinois, the tuition bill, which the House passed 112-4 and the Senate passed 55-1, was supported by the Catholic Conference of Illinois, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Cardinal Francis E. George, who endorsed it in a letter to the *Chicago Tribune*.

For Sandy, it means that tuition at the University of Illinois at Chicago will be about \$6,000 next year instead of close to \$20,000, which would cover the out-of-state tuition rate as well as fees charged for international students.

And, although she is still not sure how she will come up with \$6,000, she plans to ask her relatives for help.

The legislation allowing immigrants to pay in-state tuition fees was a long time coming, according to its initial lone sponsor, Rep. Edward Acevedo, a Democrat.

"I've been fighting for this issue for three years. The first year I couldn't even get it out of committee," he told the *Catholic Explorer*, diocesan newspaper of Joliet.

Acevedo said the bill slowly gathered steam and understanding

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among his colleagues who recognized that the shape of the population is shifting and that the immigrant community is a significant part of their constituencies.

Joshua Hoyt, executive director of the immigrant rights coalition, agreed that the bill gained support because politicians have to answer to more immigrants in their constituencies and they also have seen the contributions immigrants have been making.

During a celebration of the bill's victory, Toribio Barrera of Joliet's Mount Carmel Parish spoke of his frustrations over paying premium tuition fees at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, where he is majoring in aerospace engineering.

Barrera, a 27-year-old Mexican immigrant, has been attending the institute for the past two years but only has three courses to his credit.

"I could only afford to take one course at a time," he said. "It's a slow process."

Paul Kaiser, a professor of math and computer science at Lewis University in Romeoville, took a leave of absence from the school from January to May to promote this legislation.

He coordinated efforts with Mount Carmel parishioner Lucinda Ochoa, and the two joined forces with representatives from groups throughout the state that also backed the tuition bill. Together, they positioned themselves at pivotal offices in the Illinois Capitol in Springfield, working to convince legislators to recognize the needs of the immigrant population.

The law applies to some 2,200 graduating high school seniors this year, as well as recent graduates, according to the coalition. To be eligible, students must have lived in the state at least three years and graduated from an Illinois high school.

But the students still face high hurdles because they are not eligible for government-backed loans or grants, and their undocumented status will make it difficult for them to work in their profession.

Two federal bills have been introduced to allow students to become documented, and thus eligible for student aid.

Contributing to this story was Ann Piasecki in Joliet.



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Social studies fair

Six-year-old Melanie Martinez, a student at St. Andrew's School in Rochester, gets some help May 21 from Jeannette Martinez as they work at the American flag table during the school's social studies fair.

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