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Diocese backs rights for migrant farm workers

Tears welled in Librada Paz's eyes as she described the "very scary" life migrant farm workers face in their struggle for survival — in an unfamiliar and often unfriendly land.

"A lot of people say we came to take jobs away. I don't think so," said Paz, 30, who has lived in the United States for 15 years. "We're just here to get our own future and reach our dreams. Instead of dying, you have to support yourself."

"I'd appreciate it if you can all help us," she added.

Paz's plea was directed to 20 people gathered at the diocesan Pastoral Center Jan. 7, as well as teleconference audiences at St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Pittsford, St. Francis/St. Stephen Elementary School in Geneva and St. Mary Our Mother Church in Horseheads. Included in this group were representatives from diocesan Catholic Charities, the diocesan Public Policy Committee and parish social-ministry committees.

The afternoon meeting, followed by another teleconference that evening, helped set the stage for Public Policy Weekend, a new initiative in the Diocese of Rochester. Bishop Matthew H. Clark has declared Feb. 7-8 "Public Policy Sunday," with the intent of having this become an annual event on the second Sunday of February.

All diocesan parishes are being asked to take part in a petition-signing campaign Feb. 7-8 to support the Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act of 2003



File photo

A migrant farm worker from Mexico helps plant a field of cabbage July 2, 2003, at Hamlin's Martin Farms.

(S. 1645/H.R. 3142). The bill would give undocumented farm workers the opportunity for legalization and other rights. Diocesan Catholic Charities, in conjunction with the Public Policy Committee, has declared promotion of this bill its top priority for parish-based advocacy on its 2004 public-policy agenda.

In a statement announcing Public Policy Sunday, Bishop Clark noted that Catholic social teaching regarding the poor and vulnerable "reminds us to compassionately open our hearts and minds to the reality of migrant farm workers and to support these generous people as our sisters and brothers."

THE FIGHT FOR RIGHTS

The passing of S. 1645/H.R. 3142, which was introduced in the House of Representatives Sept. 23, 2003, would affect some 500,000 farm workers believed to be among as many as 10 million undocumented workers living in this country. A product of several years' negotiations between major agricultural operations and the United Farm Workers of America, the bill would ease the path to residency and citizenship, and provide labor protections and benefits to undocumented migrant farm workers.

In the Rochester Diocese, this legislation would affect

approximately 15,000 such workers, the great majority who are Mexican natives. Speaking on their behalf at the Jan. 7 afternoon teleconference were Maria Tellez and Renan Salgado of the Rochester-based Farmworker Legal Services of New York. FLSNY, a Rochester-based organization, provides free legal services for migrant workers while also advocating that workers' rights be upheld by farm employers, housing providers and government.

Tellez said the migrant community must rely on support from lawmakers and advocates, saying the people she represents are too scared to

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Story by Mike Latona

