



**Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives**

Field Hearing: “Immigration Raids: Impacts and Aftermath on Mississippi Communities”

November 7, 2019
Tougaloo, Mississippi

**Testimony of Lorena Quiroz
Immigration Project Lead Organizer
Working Together Mississippi and Mississippi Immigrant Coalition**

Thank you, Chairman Thompson and Members of the House Homeland Security Committee, for the opportunity to share my testimony here today, and for holding this field hearing here where so many people were impacted by the huge worksite raids in August.

My name is Lorena Quiroz and I am the Immigration Project Lead Organizer with Working Together Mississippi (WTM), a statewide organization that is committed to building a non-partisan, institutionally based vehicle of civic engagement in Mississippi. In my role with WTM, I coordinated the organizing response to the raids in relationship to three of our members: Catholic Charities, the Catholic Diocese of Jackson, and the Mississippi Center for Justice.

In the aftermath of the raids here in August, I have been working with our community to support impacted families. I will share a few stories from impacted individuals and families that I have spoken with over the last three months across the region. Many of these individuals could not be here with us today. Some because they are afraid, and some because they are still detained three months later. I’m here because their stories must be told.

The View From the Ground on August 7

August 7, 2019 was the first day of school here. As soon as we heard the news that Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) had detained 680 people at six different poultry plants in the central part of the state, we sprung into action, knowing that many kids would return home from school to find one or both of their parents gone. This was the case of a 13 year old who pleaded on camera, “I want my mom.”

Neighbors sprung into action to help out and to try to explain the unexplainable to young kids that their parents weren’t coming home.

Recounting the brutality of the raids is painful. One impacted individual said, “We were treated like animals, like criminals taunted by the ICE officers. We were told we weren’t coming back

home. Why do they hate us so much? If only they knew, we left our families and friends, we came here so that our children could have a chance at a better life.”

One woman, “M,” recalls being pushed to the floor, and being made to kneel and held at gunpoint.

Another woman told us of being in her car when an ICE officer asked for her papers. He forcibly removed her from the car after cutting her seat belt with a knife, and then threw her to the ground, tying her hands very tightly. She begged the officer to let her call her children who were in school but he moved her inside with the rest of the detained workers.

After the workers were arrested at this particular plant, she described how they were all put on a bus and told they were going somewhere where their fingerprints would be taken. The officers teased her and the other workers by offering water which none of them could drink because their hands were still bound. This mom of two young kids was terrified and felt sick. She had just worked a night shift and felt like she was going to faint. She is still scared of what will happen to her and her children.

The View from Detention

After the chaos of the raids, people were transferred to detention centers in the region without access to interpreters. The majority of people detained speak a language other than Spanish or English, and couldn't fully understand the directions they were given during the raid or the questions being asked--especially questions about whether there was someone at home to care for children. This language barrier resulted in children being left in the care of friends, extended family and neighbors. And while in detention, people were asked to sign documents that were not translated and without the help of an interpreter to understand the documents in their own language. Most submitted to authority without any hesitation or understanding of their rights.

I worked directly with the family members to try to locate those detained and access basic information about their cases, and to help them set up visits to the detention centers.

“L’s” story illustrates many of these issues in detention. She is still detained three months later despite having three children at home. Thanks to a neighbor, her children are cared for, but still there is a worry that the neighbor could be detained or that the children will be taken away. L speaks Mam, which is one of three ancient dialects that many of those detained speak--and she speaks just a little Spanish. This language barrier makes communication very difficult and so she did not understand the questions that were asked during the raid. First she was detained in Mississippi and then was transferred to Louisiana. Her health has deteriorated while she has been detained--she eats only once a day and is in constant pain due to a chronic ailment. When I went to visit her with her children, her 5 year old didn't recognize her and was afraid to speak to her. I have submitted for the record many other letters and stories recounting horrible conditions in detention that demand this Committee's oversight.

In the last three months, so many families have been scrambling to find their loved ones. Over half of the persons detained were released, and the others were sent to two detention centers in Natchez, Mississippi and Jena, Louisiana. As a community with organizers and attorneys, we began the search for the detained by conducting intakes and we began to notice that days later we

weren't able to trace these detainees. Detention centers began popping up in different parts of Mississippi and Louisiana, so that individuals detained in the raid went from being held in two detention centers to now spread across thirteen different detention centers.

To say that communication with loved ones is a challenge is an understatement. The barriers seem insurmountable and they continue to multiply. The disappearance of family members to another detention center is traumatic and expensive because planned visit dates can no longer happen with the transfers and phone calls for a week cost more than an average phone bill. The Mississippi Immigrant Coalition has been helping offset some of these costs, but bills are ongoing and there's a limit to the amount of funding available.

Lasting Trauma

Families are living in fear, depressed and anxious. The trauma that these raids have caused is something that will outlast the legal cases and maybe even the lives of those detained.

I have heard about children who did not sleep for days after the raids and still cry every night because their mom is not there to put them to sleep. The impact on children in high school should not be overlooked. I know of a teenager who missed several days of school due to her anxiety and depression, and was also teased by classmates about her family being deported. Other children in high school have told me that they are required to attend truancy detention after school because they missed so many days of school. They are being forced to pay for something they had no control over because of the atmosphere of fear that was created after the raids. In addition to fear, others were would not stop crying, still others had no parents at home to help them get ready for school.

There is a great need for counseling and trauma-informed care, but our mental health system is not equipped to handle all these cases. We have very limited capacity and there's only one licensed trauma counselor in the entire state. One. She is doing her best to write reports for attorneys, to schedule appointments for children, teen groups, and to make referrals. She is working around the clock to provide services and to train licensed clinicians that are not bilingual on trauma or cultural competency, while also trying to get them interpreters.

We can do better than this. We need more support to handle this humanitarian crisis caused by the worksite raids.

Now What?

These are hardworking and proud people. They often work ten to twelve hours a day enduring horrendous working conditions. The smell of the plants remains in their nostrils even after work hours. They are forced to pay for their own safety equipment and work tools. Workers tell stories of sexual harassment. They tell of not being able to take bathroom breaks. They have often been humiliated verbally abused. Child labor has also been a part of the work life of these plants.

Many of these families we're talking about today have been working here for years, even decades. They're a part of our community and contributors to our economy. They've purchased

homes, cars, opened up bank accounts, planned rodeos, attended church, held quinceaneras, even became business owners.

Hundreds of families lost their only source of income after the raids, which has impacted the economic fabric of this community. Many of the people released have ankle monitors and are no longer able to work. Churches and community and advocacy groups have rallied together to raise money to help out with basic needs. Volunteers give up their time to be able to help distribute humanitarian aid and provide help with utilities. There's so much more to life than this--but children no longer have birthday parties and families no longer gather together--our community sacrifices the beauty of life that brings people together because they are simply trying to survive each day.

My question as a US Citizen and an immigrant myself from Ecuador is: can't we do better? Can we not live up to the religious values of our diverse traditions that call for us to welcome the stranger? Can we not live up to the American tradition of welcoming the huddled masses yearning to be free?

I say that we can. The following are some suggestions that can be implemented and funded by public/private partnerships. These partnerships can deal with the immediate crisis before us caused by the anti-immigrant policies of our current administration. This work must be done while we continue to create new and welcoming immigration policies. Policies that welcome those who contribute to rebuilding and bringing new life to these rural communities. Policies that create a legal pathway for those who are willing to do work that others do not want to do, and policies that create safe and better paying working environments.

Here are my brief suggestions:

- Individuals detained in the raid should be released and allowed to reunite with their families.
- Transparency and accountability from DHS is critical. The federal government should immediately provide documentation on the whereabouts of all still in detention.
- Funding and resources for mental and other health related issues facing these families and their children should be developed with governmental and private participation.
- Interpreters should be trained and made available to schools, mental health professionals, law enforcement personnel and legal service workers.
- A long-term crisis fund should be established with public and private dollars.

Here in Mississippi, we can see how this level of harm and devastation could have been prevented. And we also know that while the scale of what happened here is large, it is not an isolated set of events, but part of the increased enforcement efforts under this administration. We must end worksite raids, and enforcement activities that tear families apart leaving communities struggling to survive. Congress must hold DHS and ICE accountable for its actions and treatment of our community members--our families, friends, and neighbors--by holding

investigations and demanding answers. This hearing is the first step. Congress must also fight to hold the line against DHS' growing budget. Money for more enforcement activity only results in the devastation of our communities and lasting trauma. Our families deserve to be united and free in their own communities and we will all work together to fight for that day to come.

Chairman Thompson, I believe if we work together to deal with the issues I have just raised, we can move beyond this crisis and build a welcoming community in Mississippi.

Thank you.