



Alabama House Public Hearing Omnibus Bill HB 56

Testimony of Father Edward B Arroyo, SJ, Ph. D.

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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak on this important topic for the people of Alabama. My name is Edward Arroyo and I am a Catholic priest, a Jesuit, a sociologist and Alabama Associate of the Jesuit Social Research Institute. I currently serve at Spring Hill College in Mobile.

I am deeply concerned about Omnibus Bill HB 56 and the negative impact it would have on individuals, families, community volunteers, public employees, law enforcement, businesses, and even social service providers in Alabama.

The common thread that binds together all of our efforts on behalf of the poor is our bedrock belief in the dignity of every person, regardless of race, creed or color, national origin, or **immigration status**. In addressing Omnibus Bill HB 56 and the question of immigrant workers and their families in Alabama, it is important to stress two points: *first, the religious and moral framework* for this consideration; and, *second, the practical realities* of immigration in Alabama and the nation.

First, all the major religious traditions—Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Jewish, and others—all quote the same Scriptures and cite the same religious principles about immigration. They begin with the scriptural mandate to welcome the stranger and to protect them from abuse and exploitation. One example is from the *Book of Leviticus*:

"The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33-34).

While HB 56 makes over 60 pejorative references to “aliens,” religious leaders in the Judeo-Christian tradition call for national immigration reform that would love the stranger as ourselves, protect our society, meet our economic needs, protect human dignity, replace illegality with legality, and fulfill our responsibilities for the common good.

HB 56 is one attempt to address parts of the overall immigration situation, but it is not the right vehicle and does not address the need for overall reform. Rather, it would do more harm than good for our state. The Federal Government, not the State of Alabama, is the proper vehicle for such reform.

The **second** important consideration for this committee and the legislature are the practical realities of immigration, enforcement, workers, and the economy of the State of Alabama. Within the brief time allotted, I can only list some of these concerns.

- **The Complexity of Immigration Laws and Status.** In HB 56 a number of state employees, local law enforcement personnel, and others are being asked to have a level of expertise in various kinds of immigration status that requires extensive education and training in complex legal matters in order not to abuse persons in our state. The federal government permits foreign nationals to enter the country for numerous different reasons, including education, tourism, employment, to join family members already here, and to escape persecution or war. There are dozens of different types of lawful status and different documents for verifying status.
- HB 56 would place **New Financial Burdens on the Poor, Sick, and Vulnerable**, on Alabama residents who already are struggling financially. Federal law already prohibits undocumented immigrants from receiving public benefits except in emergency situations. HB 56 Section 12 sets up a variety of requirements which could lead to **Public Benefit Denials to Eligible Persons**.
- **Transporting Provision.** Federal law already explicitly prohibits the transporting of unauthorized immigrants and provides for harsh penalties, including heavy fines, forfeiture of property, and up to ten years in prison for violations. HB 56 would create a state crime for transporting any illegal alien. What of U.S. citizen children driving their undocumented parent to the doctor, the supermarket, or church? Could a neighbor or a

“good Samaritan” be subject to state penalties and imprisonment? Or the driver of a church bus or a school bus?

- **Due to a lack of time, I can only list similar concerns about**
 - **The Harboring and Sheltering Provision (Section 6)**
 - **The Criminalization of Work by Undocumented Workers (Section 7)**
 - **At least three major Problems with the Proposed Electronic Verification System.**
- **Prison and Jail Populations.** Being without documents in the U.S. traditionally has **not** been a **criminal** offense, but a violation of U.S. law subjecting the person to deportation from this country. Questions arise now about the increasing tendency to criminalize immigration status: what about the cost and desirability of subjecting potentially tens of thousands of Alabama residents to prison? What of the impact on jail and prison overcrowding? What will be the economic costs to the state and local governments of prosecution and imprisonment?

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the immigration system of this country is *broken and in need of reform*, and the Catholic Church, through our Justice for Immigrants program is a strong advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. However, that reform must take place at the federal level. Bills such as HB 56 will not bring about the needed reform, but rather, could criminalize U.S. citizen family members, good Samaritans, and thousands of volunteers who serve the poor.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak briefly on this important matter.