



Dallas-area immigrants apply for Catholic church-issued IDs to ease deportation fears

By Elvia Limon, Communities Writer

May 4, 2018

Nearly 300 people sat inside San Juan Diego Catholic Church in North Dallas at 8 a.m. on a recent Saturday — but none were there for Mass.

The predominantly Hispanic crowd sat in pews or stood against the white walls as they waited for a group of church volunteers seated near the altar to call out their assigned numbers. Many were immigrants living in the United States illegally, making them ineligible to get a Texas-issued identification card.

But now they and other unauthorized immigrants are able to apply for a church-issued ID provided by a handful of Dallas-area Catholic churches, including San Juan Diego. In recent months, Dallas, Carrollton and Farmers Branch began giving their police the discretion to accept the cards as a form of identification.

The cards include the applicant's photograph, date of birth, address, church logo and church membership number — elements recommended by the Catholic Diocese of Dallas.

Although only three area cities have given their police discretion to accept the cards as a form of ID, residents from any city can apply through participating churches.

For many applicants, even though there is no guarantee an officer will accept a church-issued ID card, the cards provide an added measure of security in a time when immigrants worry that not having an ID during something such as a simple traffic stop could lead to jail time and a possible run-in with immigration authorities.



Hundreds of people wait their turn to apply for a church-issued identification cards at San Juan Diego Catholic Church in Dallas during a recent ID card event. Many of them are immigrants living in the U.S. illegally and are unable to apply for a Texas-issued ID card. (Elvia Limon/Dallas Morning News).

"There is a fear now, and we feel exposed," Maria Matilde Ramirez of Dallas said in Spanish. She, her husband and their 21-year-old daughter were all applying for ID cards that day. "There's a lot of interest in the IDs. I have some family members who said they will be applying."

An added benefit to the card, she said, is that anyone who sees it will see that she is an active member of her church.

"If a police officer sees my ID, then he will see that I got to church and that I am a good citizen," Ramirez said.

Five hours into the event at San Juan Diego, volunteers had received about 500 applications for IDs and had issued about 300 cards. The rest couldn't be printed due to an equipment failure.

A way to avoid arrest

The push for the church IDs came after former Dallas Assistant Police Chief Gary Tittle, Farmers Branch Police Chief David Hale and Carrollton Police Chief Derick Miller met with 1,500 people at a **Dallas Area Interfaith** meeting in November.

The chiefs told the crowd they would consider utility bills, library cards and church membership cards as acceptable forms of ID under a law banning sanctuary cities in Texas. That's when Dallas-Area Interfaith leaders came up with the idea to start the church-ID program at the three churches.

"We know that does not take the place of a driver's license," said Socorro Perales, senior organizer for Dallas-Area Interfaith. "We know this is not a document issued by the state. But when they do accept it to identify the person, they can issue a ticket to their name and avoid arrest."

Under the "sanctuary cities" law signed by Gov. Greg Abbott last May, police in Texas can ask anyone they detain about their immigration status. Jurisdictions that violate the law are subject to fines up to \$25,000 a day, and local officials who break the law can be removed.

Abbott and others who back the law said that people would not be pulled over and questioned by police if they hadn't committed a crime. Racial profiling laws would be strictly enforced, they said.

But Father Michael Forge of Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Farmers Branch said several of his immigrant parishioners have been more fearful of police since the law was passed, telling him they're afraid to drive their children to school or to go to church because they're unable to get a Texas driver's license.

To help ease their fears, Forge said his parish is providing IDs to anyone who applies and provides some type of active or expired government-issued ID from their country of origin or an affidavit to prove they are who they say. The IDs are also free.

"You don't have to be Catholic for that matter," he said. "We certainly want our immigrants, legal or otherwise, to have some sort of peace."



Catholic Diocese of Dallas Bishop Edward Burns led a procession of clergy, law enforcement officials and Dallas-area city officials to the dais at Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Farmers Branch in November. Police officials from Dallas, Carrollton and Farmers Branch told the roughly 1,500 people that their officers had been given the discretion to accept church-issued ID cards as a form of identification. (File photo)

Providing added comfort

Mary Immaculate has issued 231 IDs since it first began handing out applications in March, said youth ministry assistant Erma Perez.

"We are trying to work as much as we can to provide a bit more comfort for the Hispanic community," said Perez. "Now that they have the ID, you can see it in their faces. When they leave, they leave with a little smile and they say, 'Thank you very much.'"

But not every parish works like Mary Immaculate. San Juan Diego requires parish ID applicants who are 18 years or older to first become an active church member for six months. At the time of application, they must bring an active or expired government-issued photo ID from their country of origin and be accompanied by a legal U.S. resident or citizen who can vouch for them.

San Juan Diego does not charge for the IDs, but it does in some cases ask for a small donation to cover costs of making the card.

Adriana Godines, a volunteer at the church, said the requirements are in place because to ensure that IDs aren't handed out to just anyone.

Since the start of the church ID program, she said, San Juan Diego has since registered about 1,000 new members, although many had already been attending Mass there for some time.

"For us, this is a really important document," she said. "We cannot take it lightly. It's something that person is going to show to an officer."

Similar to San Juan Diego, St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church requires applicants to have been members of the church for three months before they are issued a parish ID. Applicants must also bring a current or expired government-issued ID from their country of origin and ask for a donation.

Lily Rodriguez, secretary at St. Philip, said the church is providing cards for adults and children.

Other benefits

The ID can also be used to enroll in GED, U.S. citizenship and English-language classes that will be provided by the Dallas County Community College District at St. Philip this summer.

But for Antonio Coahuila, the biggest benefit of the parish ID is that it helps him feel part of his Dallas community.

"It's a bit of relief," he said. "It's like you finally have an identity."



Lily Rodriguez prints out parish ID cards for Gloria and Mauricio Vega, both members of St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church in Dallas. (Elvia Limon/ The Dallas Morning News).