

Business and religious leaders meet in Salinas to talk about immigration reform

By Sara Rubin

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Agriculture industry trade groups have long been vocal about immigration reform, calling on lawmakers in Washington to implement policies that help their sector, which relies on a largely immigrant workforce.

In a panel discussion on April 9, Wesley Van Camp, vice president and general counsel of agribiz Tanimura & Antle, told her colleagues in hospitality and construction that it's time for them to up their game.

"We have been lobbying for years," Van Camp said. "It's not new to agriculture.

"Of 11 million undocumented or falsely documented immigrants in this country, a small percentage of them work in agriculture. But our voice has been the loudest."

According to Van Camp, 34 percent of those 11 million work in construction, and perhaps an even larger percentage are in hospitality.

"Where are their voices at the federal level? Those are the people that are invisible and that don't have a voice in Congress. Agriculture can only do so much."

Fellow panelists included leaders of the local hospitality and construction sectors: Pete Scudder of Scudder Roofing; John Narigi of the Monterey Plaza Hotel; and Don Chapin of the eponymous construction company.



Socorro Lagarda-Quiroz, a Mexican immigrant who lives in Monterey, received amnesty in the 1980s.

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"I take that on as a bit of a challenge," Chapin told Van Camp. "I couldn't agree more."

There was a lot of agreement in the course of the discussion, hosted by **Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action**, a nonprofit with 28 member institutions in the tri-county area, including many religious institutions.

The gist of their consensus: Immigrants should be embraced, not only for moral reasons, but economic reasons.

"With Anglos, [construction] is a fallback job for people who didn't go to college," Scudder said. "We have a whole workforce of Hispanics—90 percent of our workforce. When they come to work, they want to work."

A number of COPA members told their own personal immigration stories throughout the forum.

Hector Quiroz came from Mexico to visit family in 1985, and overstayed his visa. Despite a high educational attainment in Mexico, Quiroz says he worked a string of low-paying jobs, mostly restaurant work. He eventually earned a master's degree in the U.S., and now teaches theology. He said it took him years of processing paperwork to become a citizen.

His wife, Socorro Lagarda-Quiroz, came along as a teenager from Mexico City to the Los Angeles area, where she babysat and got harvesting jobs in agriculture.

She landed a job on the basement level of a senior home doing laundry, and her upward trajectory began—literally. "I moved up to the first floor after a couple of years, as a housekeeper. There, I had the opportunity to learn English."

Still, she remembered the constant fear of immigration enforcement officials decades ago: "I used to get up at 5am to catch the bus. I remember hiding behind bushes

because it was dark. You'd just see the lights from the cars coming, and you didn't know if it was *la migra*.

"It wasn't only me. We'd go straight from home to work and back. We did many things at night, because we didn't want to get caught."

Lagarda-Quiroz benefitted from Ronald Reagan's 1986 Amnesty Act, and got a job as a teller at a Bank of America.

Personal stories and anecdotes aside, there was a call for action.

Ernesto Cortes is a giant among COPA members, as co-executive director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, with which COPA is affiliated, and a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation's "genius grant."

"Insight never liberated anybody," Cortes said. "What are we going to do about it? We have to not only talk the talk, but walk the walk."

As for potential answers to those questions: Chapin, who is active in local politics (and is a Republican) the answer is new leadership in Washington.

"We need to fire them all and start over. We have that power," he said, and was met with applause. "They're there and they're doing nothing."

Scudder said he wants to see a program that would make it easier—and faster—for employers to help sponsor citizenship applications for their workers.

As to the argument that immigrants seeking legal documentation today should just "get in line," Cortes said the wait can be upward of 20 years—meaning it's not practical.

"There is no system. There is no line. There is no way for people to come here [legally], unless they have an awful lot of money."