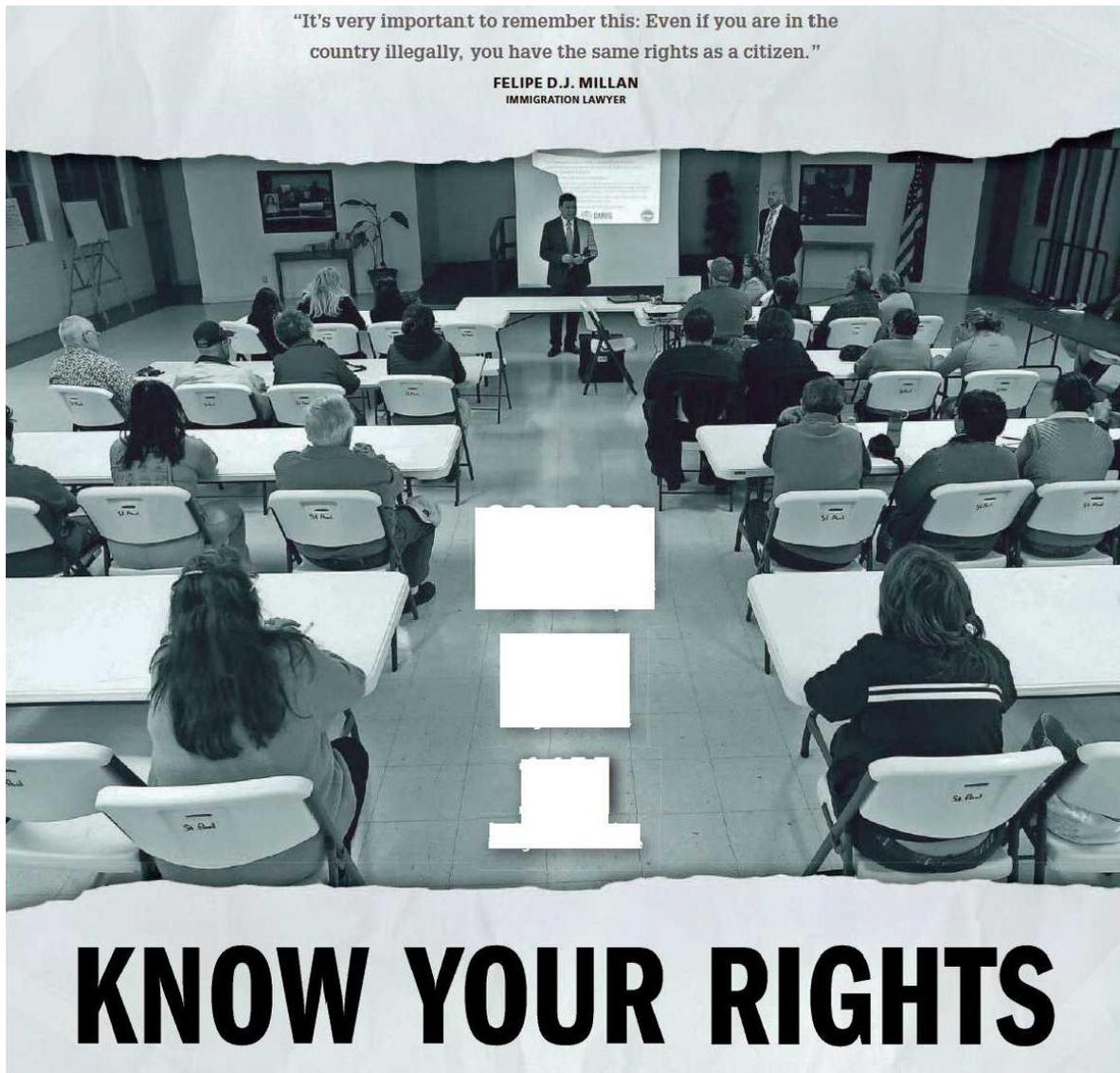


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## Local faith groups reach out to immigrants on civil rights

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An undocumented Mexican immigrant sits with his wife and three young children in an El Paso church, worried what could happen to his family if they were to be caught by immigration agents.

The youngest child is still for only so long, eventually playing at her parents' feet as leaders from the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization and Border Interfaith community groups talk to families about their legal rights despite their illegal status.

"It's very important to remember this: Even if you are in the country illegally, you have the same rights as a citizen," immigration lawyer Felipe D.J. Millan told an audience in Spanish on Tuesday.

About 50 people gathered in a meeting room at St. Paul the Apostle Parish in the Riverside neighborhood, within view of the border fence and U.S. Border Patrol agents who patrol along the levy daily.

The organizations have looked to El Paso-area churches as safe havens to address rumors, misinformation and fears among undocumented immigrants amid the anti-immigrant rhetoric of President Donald Trump.

"People are afraid to go outside," said Millan, adding that some parents have sought to make legal arrangements for care of their children should the parents be deported.

Millan said that some people falsely believe that the Trump administration has changed the law. It has not. There are also fears of temporary immigration checkpoints popping up on streets. They have not.

The "Conozca sus Derechos" (know your rights) meetings, which have already been attended by more than 500 people, are intended to dispel misinformation and give immigrants a chance to ask questions, said Arturo Aguila, an organizer for the El Paso groups.

EPISO and Border Interfaith are part of the Southwest IAF Network of the [Industrial Areas Foundation](#), a national network of local faith and community-based organizations. There have been similar immigrant informational meetings in cities such as Phoenix and Portland, Ore., Aguila said.

[El Paso County officials](#) are also looking into ways to distribute informational material on immigrants' constitutional rights at county buildings as other advocacy groups across the city and the nation come together to provide education and assistance to undocumented immigrants.

It's estimated 66,000 undocumented immigrants live in El Paso County, according to the [Migration Policy Institute](#), citing 2010-2014 data. That's about 7.5 percent of the countywide population at the time. There were nearly 1.5 million unauthorized immigrants in Texas and an estimated 11 million nationwide in 2014.

At the EPISO and Border Interfaith presentations, immigrants are reminded that they have the right to remain silent, a right to an attorney and are advised not to sign any document given to them by immigration agents without talking to a lawyer.

They were also advised not to open the door to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents without a warrant.



VICTOR CALZADA/EL PASO TIMES  
EPISO lead organizer Arturo Aguila, left, and immigration attorney Felipe D.J. Millan spoke to a gathering at the St. Paul the Apostle Church meeting room Tuesday evening.

"Look, once you open the door to immigration agents, you would have given them permission to come inside. Once they enter, many things can happen. ... So, don't do it. Don't do it."

**ARTURO AGUILA**  
ORGANIZER FOR THE EL PASO GROUPS

"Look, once you open the door to immigration agents, you would have given them permission to come inside," Aguila said at the meeting. "Once they enter, many things can happen. There could be other people in the home. The immigration agents may starting asking, 'You, what's your name? How long have you been here?' ... They came in looking for Arturo and they took Maria, Jose, Raul and several people. So, don't do it. Don't do it."

If pulled over by police, people have to identify themselves but can remain silent and not answer other questions, Millan said. He reminded them that El Paso police and sheriff's deputies are not there to enforce immigration laws.

Undocumented immigrants were advised to pay traffic fines to avoid going to jail, where they could potentially be taken into custody by ICE.

"Not paying fines is a very bad idea no matter how small the fine is," Millan said.

While in jail, immigrants can still legally decline to talk to immigration agents, Millan added.

Millan also advised immigrants to get a temporary identification number from the IRS because it becomes a record of how long a person has been in the country.

"In my career as a lawyer, I have never seen a judge who didn't like seeing people pay taxes," Millan said.

Immigrants were also cautioned that a notary is not a lawyer.

In the U.S., notaries public only serve as a witness when a document is signed — not as a legal help as may be the case in some countries, Millan said.

Aside from the legal advice, church leaders want to offer undocumented immigrants some comfort.

"You are not alone," the Rev. Pablo Matta, pastor of St. Paul the Apostle, told immigrants. "We are not asking anyone to violate the law. We are using the laws that exist."

The information presented at the meeting helped ease some concerns, said the immigrant who attend the gathering with his young church-going family.

The family, who the El Paso Times is not naming, crossed the border with a visa and stayed to live in Lower Valley five years ago, seeking a better life than they had in Juárez, the man said.

The family has mixed citizenship. Dad, mom and a 9-year-old son are Mexican citizens, while a 4-year-old son and a 1-year-old daughter are U.S. citizens.

The family came to the United States "so the kids could go to school, learn English and have better opportunities and, mainly, because of the insecurity there" in Juárez, the dad said while holding his baby daughter.

"There is a lot of racism," he said when asked about the anti-illegal immigration rhetoric. "They see us as something strange. We have civil rights, human rights."

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