

Immigration advocates say candidates ignoring issue

By JENNA PORTNOY

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Sylvia Salazar has one foot in the United States and one in Columbia.

"My culture, my ideas, everything that I learned from my parents and my family will always be with me, but this country is home to me now," said the wife and mother, who will be eligible for citizenship next year.

She was lucky enough to have parents with the resources to send her to college in Kansas on a student visa 14 years ago. Unlike the undocumented immigrants highlighted early in the presidential primary, Salazar came here legally and now helps others do the same.

Many companies that rely on visiting workers, like the Warrington landscape contractor where she works as the human resources manager, want the government to increase or eliminate caps on the number of temporary workers allowed to come into the country.

Presidential hopefuls Barack Obama and John McCain officially support a system that lets employees confirm their employees' eligibility to work in the U.S. McCain goes further than his rival. On his Web site, he lays out a plan that would ensure the cap on low-skilled, non-agricultural workers "rises and falls with market demand." He also would protect workers against employer abuse.

Long before the economic crisis hit, other campaign issues — national security, health care, home foreclosures — pushed immigration out of the spotlight and the candidates have hardly gone out of their way to bring it up. None of the debates addressed immigration, once a signature issue for McCain.

"Both candidates only talk about immigration when they are trying to get votes from the minorities, from Spanish-speakers especially," Salazar said. "I don't think [the presidential candidates] are really interested in Latinos."

A poll of 1,600 Latino registered voters in Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada found significant support — 74, 69 and 71 percent, respectively — for Obama. In Florida, the Latino vote was split evenly between Obama and McCain. The poll has a margin of error of 4.7 percent and was conducted by phone by Latino Decisions and Pacific Market Research.

The issue of immigration has significant economic consequences for Salazar's company, Land-Tech Enterprises, where about 20 percent of the 138 workers enter the U.S. on H-2B visas from Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Jamaica.

This type of permit regulates non-agricultural, non-professional jobs in hotels, restaurants, landscaping and other seasonal industries that rely on H-2B visa workers to keep their businesses afloat, said Salazar. This year's cap is 66,000 people, although the limit has been raised or eliminated in past years depending on market needs.

U.S. Department of Labor statistics show the federal government certified more than 250,000 visas in fiscal year 2007, including 8,873 in Pennsylvania. This doesn't, however, necessarily mean the government approved enough workers to fulfill all the visas requested. "They're all competing for these visas to keep their operations running at peak season," Salazar said.

At Land-Tech, Salazar not only answers visiting workers questions in their own language, but also enforces the policies of the program that brought them here.

For example, another form called the I-9 usually limits workers to 10 months in the United States. If a worker disappears before then, the company reports the employee to the government. However, Salazar says most workers are reliable and some return year after year, from April to November. They pay into unemployment and Social Security, but will never collect either.

AMERICANS DON'T APPLY

The company pays \$600 to \$800 per worker for document processing in addition to housing costs and bus or plane fare. In exchange, the workers make \$10 to \$16 an hour as drivers and foremen to supervise mower crews and installers of plants or trees.

"I can guarantee you I have done my best to recruit American workers," she said. "It's not that we want to bring everyone to this country, it's just that we need people to do jobs Americans don't want to do."

Some argue that expanding the number of workers will only encourage immigrants to overstay their welcome.

The idea of farming out jobs to foreign workers is especially unpopular in these fragile economic times, said Mariann Davies. The stay-at-home Doylestown mother of four is vice chairwoman of You Don't Speak for Me, a national organization that opposes illegal immigration.

"Obviously right now, the candidates are not talking about their immigration plans because it's hard to justify bringing in more foreign workers when we're in a state of crisis," she said. "They're being silent on purpose — it's a pretty hard sell."

Davies, who's an attorney, said the policies of both candidates amount to amnesty and citizenship for undocumented workers. McCain backed away from the issue after two bills he sponsored failed, "and we're hoping he means it," she said.

Border security is crucial to solving the problem, she said.

"The issue regarding national security has not changed," she said. "If anything, it's gotten worse. If we want to help American families and workers, then we need to be doing immigration enforcement and control."

From an early age, she said, she understood the "fundamental unfairness" of allowing one group the benefits of citizenship without going through the proper channels while her family and friends went through a lengthy, expensive citizenship process.

Davies' parents, who are naturalized citizens, emigrated from Ecuador in the 1950s. They did it "the right way — like millions of other Americans," she said. She watched a 1986 amnesty program "fail miserably in its goal to reduce illegal immigration" and lead to what she called fraud as immigrants scrambled to document when they entered the country.

Davies supported a bill that would have required employers to verify potential employees' legal status via a free 800-number. She opposes offering driver's licenses to illegal immigrants as some states do. The licenses, de facto national identification cards, allow people to register to vote, she said.

Overall, she said, Latinos and people of Hispanic descent have the same concerns as any other Americans — the economy, health care and education. They do not vote as a block.

"Those with special interests are trying to paint another picture," she said.

The misconceptions about immigration don't end there, said Judy Martyak, a Doylestown family law attorney who advises Spanish-speaking clients on custody matters.

First off, she said, not all immigrants in Bucks County are Mexican. The area is attractive for people from Russia, the Far East, India, the Middle East and any Spanish speaking country and anyone who can get to Canada, Mexico or any U.S. port can enter the country, she said.

"The reality is people come here from all parts of the world," she said. "People can come here with a visa and simply stay and not return [to their home countries.]"

Martyak, who left Puerto Rico for the mainland in 1978, compared the border to a "river without a dam" that must be controlled. Until that happens, she said, provisions must be made for the children of workers rounded up in immigration raids.

"It looks very good in the newspaper: ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] got 400 or so [illegal immigrant] workers," she said, "But how many minors are left behind? Are they from this country or another country? Were they born here?"

Land-Tech's Salazar said it's important to her and her husband Camilo Sandino that their 4-year-old son, Daniel, understands his heritage. They speak Spanish at home, but he learns English at day care and has even corrected his mother's grammar.

They also want him to value the opportunities afforded him in America, which is why they always celebrate at traditional Thanksgiving.

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