

MVP 2008 SPRING ACTION GOALS

EXPAND IMMIGRANT ACCESS TO LEGAL SERVICES

What is the issue: There is a severe shortage of quality, low-cost legal services in the Merrimack Valley to assist newcomers with the range of immigration issues they are facing—whether they are refugees from war-torn countries seeking asylum in the United States, or legal immigrants seeking to be reunited with loved ones or to become citizens. For instance, Neighborhood Legal Services, one of the principal legal aid providers in the Merrimack Valley, currently has *no* full-time immigration attorneys on its staff. The lack of legal services has a profound impact on thousands of immigrants in our communities, whose dreams of securing freedom and safety in the United States, and of being re-united with their families, can be crushed because of a lack of access to quality legal assistance.

Who are the decision-makers, and what are we asking of them: At today's Spring Action, we seek public commitments from State Representative William Lantigua and State Senator Susan Tucker to support a proposed \$5 million increase in funding in the state budget for civil legal aid. This would bring additional funding into Neighborhood Legal Services, supporting their efforts to add 2 full-time immigration attorneys to their staff, and expanding their capacity to provide legal representation, conduct community outreach, and coordinate know-your-rights training on immigration issues. Increased state funding for civil legal aid would also support ongoing legal aid programs to assist the victims of housing foreclosures, domestic violence, discrimination, and workplace abuse, among other issues.

AFFIRM AND EXTEND THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC EDUCATION

What is the issue: MVP believes that our core religious and democratic values call us to support universal public education for all children, native-born and newcomer alike. Ninety percent of public school students in Lawrence and more than 50% of students in the Lowell public schools are immigrants or the children of immigrant parents. Immigrant students face special linguistic, cultural, and structural challenges to success in our public education system. Although federal law ensures the right of all children to be educated in the public schools, regardless of status, many parents are afraid to take an active role in their children's schooling because of their own immigration status. And undocumented high school graduates are denied in-state tuition rates at public universities and community colleges. Together, these circumstances undermine the goal of universal access to public education for thousands of immigrant youth in our region.

Who are the decision-makers, and what are we asking of them: At today's Spring Action, we seek commitments from Lawrence School Superintendent Wilfredo Laboy and Lowell High School Headmaster William Samaras to continue their work to promote immigrant student achievement and parental involvement in our schools, and to make a special effort to reassure parents and students that the schools are a welcoming and safe place for all immigrants, regardless of their legal status. In addition, we are asking these and other school officials to join us in calling on Governor Deval Patrick to take administrative action to provide college access to the estimated 400 to 600 qualified Massachusetts high school graduates currently denied in-state tuition rates due to their immigration status.