

My name is Robert Kell. I serve as director of the Faribault Welcome Center, a resource center for immigrants and other community members. Our primary mission is to ensure access to information and resources for all as we work to create an inclusive, welcoming community.

I would simply like to share a perception that comes from eleven years of community work with Catholic Charities and the Faribault Diversity Coalition in Rice and Le Sueur Counties. While poverty affects many in many ways, there is one group that we should not exclude from the conversation, even if they will most likely not have a place in any budget that is developed. The undocumented men, women and children in our communities are among the most economically challenged. They cannot easily stand before you with their story for obvious reasons. Without open access to work or to public assistance of almost any kind, they struggle to provide food for their families, to find health care, and to acquire decent housing. Yet these families do not leave. They accept to live in the conditions of poverty in the hope of a better future for their children. And this applies to hundreds of people here in our communities. Many do work as they can. Many manage OK, but many do not. It is those I ask you not to forget.

As we study the conditions of families living in poverty within our state, we have to at least recognize that this group exists, that people are suffering under the current policies. Solutions are complicated. But documents or not, human beings remain human beings, with basic rights to food, to work, to education and to health care.

I speak to you of Maria, a mother of two, who has lived in the county for seven years. She is married to Juan, living in a trailer that was purchased under the name of an uncle with documents. Juan had a good job for a number of years, though had to leave when Immigration pressed the company for better scrutiny of its employees. Since then he has hopped around to several companies, each time having to relinquish the job when his Social Security number was coming into question. Maria had not seen her mother for seven years because of not having documents to travel. Her mother in another country had never seen the grandchildren. Maria decided to travel for a visit, on the rumor that a certain agency in her country could help her acquire a work visa to the U.S. She took the kids and stayed for several months as she waited for the visa to be granted. The agency had promised more than they could deliver—the visa dragged on and on until she finally realized that it would not be granted. She needed to return to her husband, so she had a friend come to pick up the children and return them. She arranged to cross with a coyote. What was promised to be a crossing of 8 hours through the desert turned into 3 days. Arriving they were “sold” to another person who housed them but then demanded a second payment to let them leave. She did finally arrive, but only after spending all their savings and going into debt with friends to pay the crossing.

Hope leaves people very vulnerable. The community helps its own tremendously. But people continue to struggle. We ask only that the State acknowledge that these people also suffer the conditions we seek to eliminate. We hope that the solutions can be broad enough to encompass all.