

# Panel touts benefits of immigration reform

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Hector Salamanca came to the United States on a tourist visa when he was 3 years old.

He and his family had planned to return to his native Mexico, but as the economic situation there worsened, they stayed, even after their visa expired. But Salamanca didn't know he was living in the country illegally until he was getting ready to go to college.

His dad told him at the end of his junior year of high school. At first, he didn't think it was a big deal. But once he graduated, he realized he wasn't eligible for the same scholarships and grants his classmates were.

Since then, Salamanca has earned an associate's degree and plans to attend Drake University. He wants to be an immigration lawyer. Now, he's spreading his message to other Latino youth in similar situations.

"Don't let your undocumented status prevent you from achieving your goals," he said.

About 230 people came to hear Salamanca and others speak as part of an immigration forum hosted by U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., on Thursday at Ames Middle School.

The panel consisted of the two senators; Salamanca and Eduardo Rodrigues, 24, of Orange City, another "dreamer," who was brought to the United States as a child; Lori Chesser, a senior attorney and chair of the immigration department at Davis Brown Law Firm; Rev. Barb Dinnen, pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Des Moines; and Nick Harrington, union representative from the UFCW Local 222 in Sioux City.

"Today, our immigration system's broken," Harkin said.

Harrington's organization represents two packing houses that employs about 5,000 people, 75 percent of whom are Latino. Harrington said reform will help improve the situation for all workers.

"It will help end the exploitation of any worker," he said.

Harkin and Durbin, who was also part of the "Gang of 8" who crafted the immigration bill that has passed the Senate, touted all the benefits that would come with reforming the country's immigration system, with tax revenue and economic benefits. Harkin said that reforming the system would reduce the deficit by \$2 trillion in 20 years.

Both also referenced recent survey results from the American Action Group, conducted by The Terrace Group, which showed a majority of voters in Iowa's 4th Congressional District favored "generic "comprehensive immigration reform" and an earned pathway to citizenship or legal status.

Durbin said suggestions that those who would be eligible under the DREAM Act were criminals weren't true. He said to be eligible, you would have to graduate from high school and pass a criminal background check.

Harkin added that Iowans as a whole did not use language to degrade certain people.

"We Iowans are a welcoming people," he said.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, was mentioned several times throughout the forum, including in a post-program press conference. The congressman from Iowa's 4th District caused a stir recently after he made comments about "Dreamers."

"For every one who's a valedictorian, there's another hundred out there that they weigh 130 pounds and they've got calves the size of cantaloupes because they're hauling 75 pounds of marijuana across the desert," King said.

But it wasn't all pro-reform at the forum. A small group of protesters stood outside the school holding up signs for border enforcement and in support of King.

Michael Means, 63, of Ames and who held a sign that said "secure borders first," said he came to the rally to show his support for King because he didn't have sympathy for immigrants who are in the United States illegally.

"He'd like to see (the border) secured, I'd like to see it closed, actually," he said. "I think people ought to have a way to come in that's legal as any other country's immigrants come here and become legal citizens."

King released this statement in response to the forum:

"I will not be responding to political initiatives during the time flags are flying at half staff for America's most decorated hero, Col. Bud Day, of Sioux City. There will be time after the last notes of taps echo off the Iowa bluffs."

Col. George "Bud" Day, a former POW, medal of honor recipient and Iowa native, died this week.