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Princeton Leaders and Residents Debate Immigration

Organizers hope that Tuesday's event at the library will be the first of many such discussions.

By [Greta Cuyler](#) | [Email the author](#) | 5:30am  [Print](#)

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What do Albert Einstein and hundreds of thousands of New Jersey residents have in common?

They are immigrants (and Einstein was), just like all of our ancestors were at one point.

But the issue of immigration has reached a boiling point in the U.S. with people like Manolo Donis of Rocky Hill left in immigration limbo.

Donis, a father, professional cook and volunteer firefighter, came to the U.S. in 1997 on a work visa. His employer filed paperwork to sponsor the Guatemalan resident for U.S. citizenship.

But after Donis' employer went out of business in 2008, the government started removal proceedings against Donis.

Now Donis doesn't know if he'll be able to stay in U.S., despite strong community ties and numerous letters filed on his behalf.

"He's the American dream," Patricia Fernandez-Kelly said of Donis on Tuesday night. "He's a volunteer firefighter, an exemplary man; there is no reason he should not have a claim to the community."

Fernandez-Kelly, a member of the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund, was the moderator at Tuesday's Community Roundtable on Immigration held at the Princeton Public Library.

About 60 people came to hear more than a dozen community panelists discuss immigration and give their own thoughts during a two-hour, town hall-style meeting in the Community Room.

"This is one of hopefully thousands of conversations that are happening around the country on immigration because it turns out many communities are struggling with the same issues that Princeton is," said Anastasia Mann of the Rutgers Eagleton Institute and the Princeton Joint Human Services Commission.

Immigration is a pertinent topic in Princeton.

One-third of Princeton Regional School students are non-caucasian and it's estimated that there are 57 primary languages spoken in student homes, Superintendent Judy Wilson said.

University Medical Center at Princeton offers extensive translation services at both the hospital and clinic and estimates it serves more than 5,000

people from different ethnic groups through community outreach events, said Pam Hersh of Princeton Health Care Systems.

Evidence overwhelmingly shows that undocumented immigrants pay \$8 million into federal coffers through taxes, payroll withdrawals, etc., and assuming no change in immigration status, those people will never receive that money back in benefits, Mann said.

"There's more impact at the state and local level, but the net benefit is in our favor," she said.

Undocumented workers are pushed into society's shadows, yet are penalized for doing so, said Ryan Stark Lilienthal, a Princeton immigration attorney.

"If there was a path to legalization where people could come out of shadows, they could buy insurance, health insurance and advocate for the rights of workers and wages," he said. "I think if we focus on solutions, a lot of these secondary issues wash away."

Immigration is not a cut and dried issue residents said on Tuesday.

Children brought to the U.S. do not have a choice, but often struggle to earn a college education and may live in fear of deportation. Children born in the U.S. to undocumented parents may be saddled with stress and anxiety and additional responsibilities if their parents face deportation.

For one Princeton leader, the rants against illegal immigrants make no sense.

"It boggles my mind when I think about Glen Beck and the affluent and powerful saying 'We can't allow these people into our country,'" said Rev. Carlton E. Branscomb of the First Baptist Church of Princeton. "We were not the first people here, and we still have not made amends to the Native American population."

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