

5/22/07

The Honorable Jon Tester
204 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-2604

Senator Tester,

The Montana Human Rights Network is writing you today to address the issue of comprehensive immigration reform. On Saturday, May 19th your Communications Director, Matt McKenna, was quoted in the Helena Independent Record. His quote was as follows:

“But what I can tell you is that he wants a policy that is first and foremost fair to the taxpayers. He does not support amnesty. He believes that we need to strengthen our ports and borders, that folks that want to come to this country need to get in line no different than his ancestors did, and we need to crack down on employers who are knowingly hiring illegals.”

Senator Tester, this sort of message is inaccurate and dehumanizing to undocumented immigrants and refugees. First, stating that any policy must be “fair to the taxpayers” seems to imply that undocumented immigrants and refugees are not taxpayers. In fact, undocumented immigrants and refugees pay an array of local, state and federal taxes in various forms and are a vital part of the United States economy. However, these immigrants and refugees are not able to access the majority of services which they help to fund with their tax contributions. This is clearly unfair to undocumented taxpayers.

Second, you suggest that immigrants should be expected to follow the same process that your ancestors did. We understand that your family homesteaded land in Big Sandy in 1916 and thus immigrated to this country sometime before that. As we are sure you are aware, that was during the United States’ open immigration period. The plights of your ancestors who immigrated and those who are immigrating today are quite different. While it is likely the case that their motivations were similar (a better life for themselves and their families, an opportunity to escape oppression, etc.) the governmental obstacles

that immigrants face today are simply not comparable with those that immigrants faced during the open immigration period.

Finally, referring to undocumented immigrants and refugees as “illegals” is referencing a very general characteristic of their immigration status in a way that dehumanizes them. This type of labeling works to marginalize them and devalues the important roles which they play in our society.

We urge you to support a just and comprehensive immigration reform policy. We do not believe the current “compromise bill” before the U.S. Senate meets this standard. Rather, we urge you to support a policy that brings our undocumented neighbors, co-workers and friends out of the shadows and allows them to fully participate in society. Immigration is an American experience and acceptance is an American value. Please remember this as you embark on the hard work of crafting just and comprehensive immigration reform policies.

The Network has taken a leading role in the effort to educate and organize around this issue in the state of Montana. During the debates that will take place on this issue in the coming months, you should expect to hear from our organization and our members. We would be happy to discuss our views on just and comprehensive immigration reform and the current “compromise bill” at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Christine Kaufmann
Executive Director
Montana Human Rights Network