

AMOS hosts immigration conversation

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An immigration reform advocate from Marshalltown whose brother is facing deportation led a community discussion on immigration Thursday night at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church.

Two dozen people attended the event, which was hosted by A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy, a community-building group active in Ames. Karina Mendoza-Alvarez, a 19-year-old student at Marshalltown Community College, led the conversation with Mark Grey, a professor of anthropology at the University of Northern Iowa.

Mendoza-Alvarez described her mother's five-year ordeal in the immigration court system to gain legal residency after she was swept up in an immigration enforcement raid of Marshalltown's JBS Swift meatpacking plant in 2006, when Mendoza-Alvarez was just 11 years old.

In the week following the raid, Mendoza-Alvarez was taken care of by her older sister, Maria, who is now 25 and in the country legally as part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program. Mendoza-Alvarez was born in Iowa, but her mother, sister and brother, 23-year-old Diego, moved to Iowa from Villachuato in west-central Mexico.

Now, Diego is going through the immigration court system, his legal status unclear and the chance of deportation a real possibility.

"With a broken immigration system, it's never going to end," said Mendoza-Alvarez, who in July was one of more than 100 people arrested in Washington, D.C., outside the White House protesting for immigration reform.

Grey, the lead author of "Postville: USA," a book on the infamous 2008 Agriprocessors Inc. meatpacking plant raid in the northeastern Iowa town, spoke before Mendoza-Alvarez. He described the influx of Mexican immigrants into Iowa that began around 1993 but subsided after the Postville raid.

Some AMOS volunteers, like Mendoza-Alvarez, voiced support for comprehensive immigration reform, which could provide a path to citizenship for many of the 11 million or so undocumented immigrants estimated to be in the country.

A major second-term initiative of President Barack Obama, immigration reform has been stalled in Congress for more than a year in large part because of resistance to such a broad-based approach, often criticized as "amnesty" for illegal behavior, in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

U.S. Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, one of the House's most vocal opponents of immigration reform and programs including DACA, was invited to attend Thursday's meeting by AMOS volunteers at an August town hall the congressman held in Ames. King said he would probably be in Washington, D.C., Thursday but would be willing to send a representative on his behalf.

No one representing King ended up attending Thursday's event, although Rick Exner, an AMOS volunteer, chalked that up to a miscommunication.

Exner said AMOS organized the event in part in the interest of holding a discussion on immigration that would be a "non-confrontational-type discussion," a contrast to asking pointed questions at a town hall.

One effort AMOS is interested in, Exner said, is supporting legislation to allow undocumented immigrants in Iowa to receive drivers' licenses, a proposal supported by numerous law enforcement officials including Story County Sheriff Paul Fitzgerald, a Democrat.

