

Testimony of
The Honorable Louis Barletta

July 5, 2006

June 30, 2006

Good morning

My name is Louis J. Barletta, and I am the Mayor of the City of Hazleton, Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your invitation to be here today so I can address an extremely important issue facing our City - illegal immigration.

Late on the night of May 10th, 2006, a 29-year-old Hazleton City resident, Derek Kichline was standing near his truck a few blocks from the heart of Downtown Hazleton when he was accosted by two men. These men approached him and shot him directly in the face from about a foot away. Kichline fell to the pavement and died.

The very next day, a 14-year-old boy took out a gun and started firing shots in a crowded City playground - a place I consider sacred ground.

Both of these gruesome incidents forced detectives and officers in the Hazleton Police Department to work more than 36 straight hours to solve these crimes. Four were arrested in the murder case. All four are illegal immigrants.

The teenaged gunman was caught and taken into custody while carrying 10 bags of crack cocaine. He is a 14-year-old child - an illegal immigrant.

A few days later, we had a Federal drug bust. Some of those arrested were illegal immigrants.

We've seen a dramatic increase in gang-style graffiti, some of which includes threats to kill our police officers. Graffiti has marred an award-winning redevelopment project that turned vacant factories into family homes.

Now, those homes, those families, are threatened by hoodlums who don't respect people or their property.

As mayor of Hazleton, I have had enough!

Hazleton is a small city, an All-American city. We're in the heart of Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region. Because of that, we've gone through hard times in the past, but just as others have done before us, we have confronted these issues head on.

When I came into office, I was faced with a \$1.2 million deficit. We worked hard together as a City and turned our deficit into a surplus in less than two years!

As for our population, our city has exploded from about 23,000 people in the last census to just over 31,000, according to recent estimates. This is more than a 30% increase in population in just a few years.

Because much of that population was drawn to factories outside the city limits, we've struggled to increase our services to cope with the growth and have had a relatively steady tax base. Our annual budget is just \$7 million.

For decades, we might have had a murder once every seven years -- then like many other small cities, people would spend the next six years talking about it. But the shooting death of Derek Kichline was the second murder in the city within eight months.

Hazleton's residents have been shaken by these and other high-profile crimes. The 31 officers of our police department have been stretched to the limit.

They have spent hundreds of hours -- and the city has spent thousands upon thousands of dollars -- investigating crimes committed by illegal immigrants. Illegal immigration is a drain on Hazleton's resources.

Every domestic incident, every traffic accident, every noise complaint -- each time we send our police department, fire department or code enforcement office to respond, it costs taxpayer dollars.

We must dig deep into the city's accounts to pay for illegal immigrants, while illegal immigrants do not pay their fair share of taxes, either to the city, the county, the state or the country.

And every minute spent by a police officer, a firefighter, or city official tackling a problem created by an illegal immigrant is a minute he or she is not serving the legal, taxpaying population of my city.

In the City of Hazleton, I proposed, and City Council tentatively passed, the Illegal Immigration Relief Act, a measure that confronts the illegal immigration problem in my town.

My Relief Act is comprised of three components:

One component of this ordinance would punish companies that hire illegal immigrants by denying them permits, for a period not less than five years from its last offense, making it harder for them to renew permits and forcing their loss of city business.

The second area would hold landlords accountable. Because people moving into the city naturally require a place to sleep, our landlords are our first line of defense.

Landlords who knowingly rent to illegal immigrants -- that is, who rent to people without acquiring documentation -- may be fined \$1,000 for every illegal immigrant staying on their properties.

The final part of this ordinance makes English the language of official city business in Hazleton.

Let me be clear - this ordinance is intended to make Hazleton one of the most difficult places in the U.S. for illegal immigrants.

Only legal immigrants are welcome in Hazleton. With hard work and determination, Hazleton can be a place where their dreams come true. Illegal immigrants are not welcome here.

Let me preface this by saying that I am proud of our diversity in Hazleton.

Virtually all of our city residents are descended from immigrants. My great grandfather immigrated here from Italy. We all have cultures we embrace. But government cannot mandate diversity. Government cannot force diversity upon us.

While we as individuals and as a community are free to celebrate our diversity, government must remain impartial, not favoring one culture or another. Government must work to assist everyone on a level playing field.

To level that field, we must crack down on illegal immigrants who are draining the resources of small communities like Hazleton.

We in Hazleton have taken the first step, but we need help.

One of the men who allegedly killed Derek Kichline had been arrested eight times before. He spent more than a year and a half in jail on various charges, including assault. Then he came to Hazleton.

What is particularly troubling is that he, as an illegal immigrant from the Dominican Republic, should never have been in this country in the first place, let alone in Hazleton, Pennsylvania.

If others had done their jobs by keeping this murderous thug and his cohorts out of the country, out of Hazleton, Derek Kichline may still be alive today, and Hazleton might not have been forced to take the dramatic steps we are taking now.

We deal with illegal immigration every single day.

In Hazleton, it is not some abstract debate about walls and amnesty, but it is a tangible, very real problem.

We need the Federal government's help. Help does not come in the form of passing an amnesty measure in the US Senate. Help comes in the form of true immigration reform that says people who are here illegally have broken the law, and they are no longer welcome.

I ask you today to make our borders stronger by putting up walls and providing more security at our borders. Without securing our borders, how do we ever expect to stop the problem?

I also ask you to give Hazleton the resources it needs to remove the illegal immigrants from our city. I challenge you to open a necessary Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) office in downtown Hazleton.

If we do not and cannot stop illegal immigration in Hazleton, where will we stop it? This is an issue that will affect every single city, borough and township in Pennsylvania and the United States, if it doesn't already.

Based on the response we've received in Hazleton, I believe it has.

Since I proposed this measure a few weeks ago, we have been inundated by more than 7,000 e-mails from people across the country. We've received overwhelmingly positive feedback from all of your states and literally every state in the union, from Alaska and Hawaii to Maine, from our southern border states, and even from our brave soldiers fighting for our freedom overseas.

We've also sent copies of our ordinance to municipalities around the country.

Several townships and boroughs around Hazleton have already begun implementing their own versions.

Communities are crying out for relief.

I, like every other elected official in the nation, took an oath to protect my citizens. The measure I proposed seeks to protect the people of Hazleton.

After cracking down on illegal immigrants, our police can then focus on crimes committed by legal residents. Our other city officials can work to improve the quality of services we offer to legal residents. Our budget will be able to be spent paving more streets, boosting economic development opportunities, hiring more police officers, and improving our shared quality of life.

Cities like Hazleton are the lifeblood of America. We are buckling under the strain of illegal immigration. We need help.

If we cannot get it from outside our borders, we must and we will take steps from within to secure our future.

Thank you for your time.

Mayor Louis J. Barletta
City of Hazleton, Pennsylvania