

Metro Monitor

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Q.&A.: RUSTY KENNEDY

OC benefits from undocumented workers, official says

As executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission, Rusty Kennedy frequently hears complaints about the perceived ill effects of undocumented residents on the county. One of the commission's goals is to eliminate such tensions between Orange County residents of various ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds.

Q. What are the most common myths about undocumented residents of the county?

A. The single largest misconception is that they're a drain on tax-supported social services.

Nothing could be further from the truth. They pay all the taxes citizens do and collect on very few of the services of tax-supported institutions. For instance, they can't get Medi-Cal. They can't get unemployment insurance. They can't get housing subsidies. They can't collect welfare or Social Security.

If the children of undocumented residents are born here and therefore are U.S. citizens, then the children are eligible for various benefits. But in most cases, the children don't collect the benefits because their parents are afraid to go into governmental offices.

The citizens who complain about illegal aliens collecting government benefits usually are basing their complaints on hearsay rather than actual information because the facts aren't there to support the conclusions they draw.

Q. Does Orange County benefit financially from undocumented workers?

A. Definitely, for a whole bunch of reasons. For the most part, they're working people, so they supply the low-cost labor that draws industry to the area.

Because of the industry, there are benefits to our local economy. They pay Social Security tax, property tax, sales tax and



H. Lorren Au Jr./The Register

Rusty Kennedy of the Orange County Human Relations Commission says many complaints about illegal aliens are unfounded.

income taxes.

But they don't file returns to get refunds at the end of the year, they don't file for Social Security benefits and they don't go to the Orange County Housing Authority to ask for housing subsidies.

They're basically a law-abiding community. Frequently, though, the undocumented residents are victims of crime.

Q. What changes are Orange

County law enforcement agencies making to limit crime in communities in which large numbers of undocumented residents are concentrated?

A. In Santa Ana, Police Chief Ray Davis has been a leader in building a relationship between the police and the undocumented community in order to solve crime. He has distanced himself and his department from federal

immigration authorities.

It's not the responsibility of the police to enforce federal immigration law and it shouldn't be. His officers focus on investigating and solving crimes instead of determining a person's citizenship status.

He's creating a trust so that undocumented residents know they can call to report a crime or be a witness and not risk deportation.

Q. From your experience, are county residents becoming more or less tolerant of the growing number of undocumented workers here?

A. The tolerance fluctuates in direct relationship to the economy. When times are tough and people need someone to blame, the undocumented resident makes a good scapegoat because they have little or no voice. I'd say that over the past couple years people have become less tolerant.

Q. What are the most complaints the commission receives from undocumented residents?

A. They usually don't call to complain. They call for help: "My baby's sick and I don't have the cash the hospital is requiring up front. Where should I go?"

Unless it's a dire emergency in which case we can send them to UCI, we direct them to private, non-profit health care providers such as St. Joseph's Hospital or community clinics or individual doctors.

Q. What can be done to improve the lives of undocumented residents in the county?

A. One is building a better relationship between the police and the undocumented residents.

Another is exploding the myths that people carry about the impact of undocumented residents on tax-supported institutions.

— Orman Day/The Register