

# AIM turns focus to immigration reform

## Leggett vows to keep 'welcome sign' up for all county residents

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A coalition of 30 congregations in Montgomery County is rallying for national immigration reform for the first time, framing the issue as a spiritual and scriptural imperative to be harnessed into political action when debate resurfaces on Capitol Hill later this year.

At its annual county budget summit Feb. 24 in Gaithersburg, Action in Montgomery asked County Executive Isiah Leggett to craft a budget that does not close its \$760 million shortfall by leaving immigrants in the lurch.

Leggett (D) will unveil his fiscal 2011 operating budget March 15. After adjustments by the County Council, the budget will take effect July 1.

AIM also drew promises from Leggett on the group's hallmark issues — continued support for affordable housing and the county's "safety net" for its most vulnerable residents — but it was on immigration that the more than 230 AIM members in the basement of St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church were most impassioned.

Depicting a county at a moral crossroads, the Rev. Donna Brown of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Colesville counseled the congregations that they "cannot remain silent" while their opponents try to "create a fortress against those who are not like us.

"We can no longer stand by while the voices of fear, the voices of self-interest, are the only voices being raised and the only voices being heard," she said. "... We must be willing to act on what we believe, to raise our common voices and stand for the well-being of all our people — the widows, the orphans, the strangers; neighbors we know and the neighbors who we do not yet know."

The forum's speakers did not mention Help Save Maryland by name but an AIM spokeswoman later confirmed that the grass-roots group is at the heart of AIM's immigration campaign.

Gathering supporters in the two years since its inception, HSM has amplified its call for Leggett to eliminate programs that end up supporting illegal immigrants.

Botwin says Leggett encourages illegal immigration by helping fund, for example, the county's three day laborer centers — run by the advocacy group Casa of Maryland — and groups such as Identity, which works with youths exposed to gangs; the family advocate Centro Familia; and the Latino Economic Development Corporation, which crafts loans for small businesses.

"These are very specialized programs. These are too targeted; they're too ethnocentric. Enough of these specialized programs; the citizens have got to come first," Botwin said. "You cut it off at the roots then eventually the branches will die off and go away."

At the AIM forum, Leggett countered that any such funding amounts to a "very, very minor" share of the county's \$3-billion-plus operating budget and vowed to ensure that all county residents — whether in the country legally or not — qualify for in-county tuition at Montgomery College.

"Certainly we have some very large problems to deal with related to immigration, and ... I pushed and continue to push, and believe, that we should resolve this nationally," he said. "But I am not going to be one here locally to provide a stop so that we have a big sign outside that says 'Montgomery County is not a place that welcomes all people.' ... I believe that we're a better county for the people that we have in Montgomery County, and I will continue as county executive to fight for that."

AIM and Leggett capped off the rally by signing a letter that calls on U.S. Rep. Christopher Van Hollen to take a lead role in federal immigration reform.

Van Hollen (D-Dist. 8) of Kensington is set to meet with AIM at an immigration forum March 11 at Bethel World Outreach Ministries International in Silver Spring.