

Report: Immigrants' contributions to economy abound

FRESNO -- When the debate over immigration reform starts, Hugo Morales and Tomasa Guadalupe López want to make sure people remember their faces, their accomplishments, and, more importantly, their contributions to the local economy.

"We are all entrepreneurs," said Morales, co-founder and executive director of Radio Bilingüe, a non-profit radio network that has trained more than 2,000 Latinos on radio work. The network has a \$2.5 million annual budget and has 25 employees.

López -- like Morales an immigrant from Oaxaca, México -- arrived in Fresno in the 1980s with a dream of opening a restaurant. She took a dental assistant course and worked in a toy-packing plant before she launched Oaxaca Restaurant in 1995.

"I continued with my dream of having my own restaurant," said López, who began publishing El Sol de Oaxaca newspaper and started the Oaxaqueños Unidos Committee.

The restaurant employs 15.

Morales and López are similar to many other immigrants, according to a report released Jan. 26 by the California Immigrant Policy Center. The report, 'Looking Forward,' shows that immigrants have high rates of entrepreneurship and make significant contributions to the local economy.

"Immigrants are a vital part of California," said Reshma Shamasunder, the center's director. "This report shows tremendous statistical evidence that immigrants are building businesses, creating jobs, and supporting local economies with their substantial spending power."

Morales and López joined Fresno City Councilmember Cynthia Sterling, local labor leader Stan Santos, and, Father Michael McAndrew at Arte Américas last Tuesday to talk about how immigrants benefit the community. They also pushed for comprehensive immigration reform.

"Comprehensive immigration reform will allow California's immigrants to contribute even more to our economy and participate more fully in our communities," said Santos, vice president of Communications Workers of America Local 94.

The report's findings on the Fresno region:

Immigrant households make up 20 percent of the total household income.

31 percent of immigrants are citizens.

The poverty rate for immigrants drops to 18 percent for those who arrived before 1980. It is 37 percent for those who arrived after 1990.

Immigrants make up 29 percent of the labor force.

About 77 percent of all Latino and Asian immigrant men of working age (25-64) are employed, compared with 72 percent of U.S.-born Latino and Asian men.

"We're seeing immigrants assume an increasingly important role in California's economy and culture," said Manuel Pastor, director of USC's Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE). He led the research team.

"The longer they remain in the country, the more immigrants contribute, paying more in taxes than they receive through government programs after a very short period," said Pastor.

Morales, who remembers picking fruit alongside his family when he was 7, said Latino entrepreneurs contribute to the community in other ways.

"When I came to Fresno, there was no Hispanic chamber then, no African American chamber," said Morales, a Harvard graduate. "There were no opportunities for Latinos to be in business clubs."

Morales helped establish the Central California Chamber of Commerce.

"I am an immigrant," said Morales. "I am the son of a former undocumented worker."

The study also looked at areas in San José, San Diego, San Francisco, Orange County, and the Inland Empire (San Bernardino, Riverside counties).