August Meeting Summary: Immigration and Project 2025

with Lissie Meza Beehan and Michael Beehan

7-25-2025 at the Clinton Community Center

Lissie Meza Beehan, a native of Merida, Mexico, served as the district translator for the Oak Ridge Schools for an impressive 11 years. During her tenure, she welcomed immigrant families to Oak Ridge and provided them with essential resources. In 2024, Lissie earned her master's degree in education and is currently teaching fourth grade.

Michael Beehan, an attorney affiliated with Fox, Farley, Willis & Burnette, holds a degree from Lincoln Memorial University-Duncan School of Law. Notably, he served as the president of the Immigration Law Society during his studies. Additionally, Michael volunteered at legal clinics at Centro Hispano in Knoxville, where his proficiency in Spanish enabled him to assist attorneys in providing legal counsel.

Michael provided an overview of Project 2025 and immigration, including a discussion of the intricacies of immigration into the United States. This encompassed the various visa types, the process of obtaining a green card for permanent residency, and the associated costs. Furthermore, Michael presented a timeline illustrating the duration of the immigration process, highlighting the backlog in the U.S. system that spans nearly three decades for certain applications. Notably, the United States is 24 years behind Mexico in terms of immigration processing, which consequently limits the annual number of individuals eligible for each category.

Approximately 14 million immigrants are currently in the United States. This figure encompasses six million individuals who are protected from deportation, including asylum seekers, crime victims, disaster victims, and recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Another eight million are unprotected and could be subject to deportation.

Project 2025 (a comprehensive conservative blueprint for change created by the Heritage Foundation) has now reached more than 50% of its goals to change government and society. The Project has specifically established criteria for immigration. It will accomplish this by curtailing refugee admissions, increasing ICE personnel and funding, and authorizing the use of tents and substandard facilities for detention. ICE now has the authority to enter churches, schools, and the courts to detain individuals. One of their unfulfilled objectives is to end the "standard of care" that is currently required for children being detained.

The impact of these policies on the immigrant community is profound. Families are being separated, and there is virtually no legal support or due process. Consequently, there are fewer avenues for protection. With the expansion of enforcement, individuals are intimidated and live in fear. The presence of ICE erodes trust in local law enforcement. Civic participation doesn't occur when there is constant fear of being arrested for no cause. And other day-to-day needs are pushed aside, such as seeking medical care or attending a child's school play, when doing so may result in detention. Consequently, the immigrant community now lives in the shadows out of fear.

Lissie described the fear that immigrant children are facing and the effects that fear is having on their school life. Absenteeism is now common within immigrant families, as parents fear going near schools and children fear leaving their parents – perhaps for the last time. She helped us imagine the heartache of sending a child off to school in the morning knowing that a simple fender-bender on the way to work might be the last time the parent sees their children. Although Lissie is a US citizen, she also experiences fear of being detained simply due to her appearance.

To further compound the problems, the Trump government is seeking a new, out of cycle, census. The issue is that immigrants would likely be reluctant to identify themselves through participation in the census; consequently, under-reporting the immigrant population which, in turn, would cause skewed statistical representation in policy and funding. With the withdrawal of government funding, services in schools disappear and there are fewer services available for non-English speakers.

What resources are available in Anderson County? There is some legal help for families fearing deportation and this might include establishing power of attorney and custody decisions for minor children. There are wallet cards available that describe an immigrant's rights through organizations such as the United Farm Workers. Allies can print the cards and distribute them to those who might need the information.
https://www.ufwfoundation.org/free_red_cards.

Although Anderson County Sheriff and the Oak Ridge Police Department do not have a contract directly with ICE, if someone comes into their custody for any reason (e.g., DUI, heavily tinted windows, domestic disputes, etc.) they are required to let ICE know. ICE then puts an "immigration hold" on the person, essentially keeping them detained locally until they can be transported to Louisiana. The Sheriff and the Oak Ridge Police can be called on directly to assist in ICE arrests via traffic and crowd control.

The ICE detainees from this region are held in Louisiana; however, the court is in Memphis. While in county custody they can seek legal help, although once taken into ICE custody the legal situation becomes much more complicated. To start with, there are no public defenders in the ICE system, there is no right to counsel in immigration court, and pro-bono immigration lawyers are few, overworked, and actively discouraged by the current administration. There is a serious loss of legal safety nets once an individual is lost in the ICE system. The only solution is to reform our immigration system, and we will consequently reform our population problems as well. We also need to bring immigrants back to the Democratic Party. Immigrants are, by and large, from religious and conservative cultures (as reflected in the 2024 bias toward Trump) and in 2026 need to see that the Party stands for values they also hold.