

All Are Welcome: PVD continues to declare itself a sanctuary city



Rhode Island has been a sanctuary state since 2014, when then-Governor Lincoln Chafee made the official declaration. If you Google the words “Providence Sanctuary City,” you’ll see a host of conflicting information, but this is mostly based on how one defines a sanctuary city. If, like Trump, you define it as a place that harbors violent criminals, then no, we have no sanctuary cities here. If, however, you’re a thinking mammal, you realize that being a sanctuary city simply means local law enforcement will not act at the behest of federal immigration officials. Thus, if an undocumented person is stopped for a traffic ticket, or is the victim of a crime, or comes in contact with law enforcement for any reason, he doesn’t have to worry about being reported and deported.

I spoke to Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza, who told me in no uncertain terms that Providence is a sanctuary city, and has been for some time. Says Elorza, “Even though the term ‘sanctuary city’ is a political term with no set definition and can mean a lot of things, I think that declaring that we’re a sanctuary city sends this unequivocal message that we support our immigrant community and that you should feel safe here.” Elorza opines the designation actually keeps us safer. First, it encourages undocumented victims of or witnesses to crime to come forward without fear of reprisal. Second, if our police are spending their time rounding up undocumented individuals, they’re obfuscating some of their duties – something that benefits no one.

Providence is engaging in a host of activities that support our immigrant community. Elorza has turned City Hall into a citizenship drive clinic, partnering with outside organizations to hold free immigration workshops. He created a program to offer municipal identification cards to residents, regardless of their immigration status. This allows them to pick up their children from daycare, get utilities turned on or do any of the myriad tasks that require an ID.

Finally, the Providence School Department opened the Newcomer Academy in 2017, which acts as a welcome center for all immigrant children entering the Providence public schools. The Academy provides students with social and emotional support and helps integrate them into the school system.

In addition to government action, private entities also are showing their best side. First Unitarian Church in Providence became a Sanctuary Church. Since I.C.E. has a policy not to enter “sensitive areas” such as schools, hospitals and churches, those institutions can apply to become an official place of refuge for any individual or family in danger of deportation. First Unitarian applied to become such a place of refuge in November of 2016 and, once the declaration was made official last June, they held a press conference to create awareness. They’ve hosted one family thus far, who stayed for several weeks before returning to their country of origin.

As for fearing repercussion from the Trump Administration, Elorza does not feel intimidated. “If anything, we’ve used this opportunity to even further support the immigrant community in ways that the city hadn’t been doing because we haven’t thought of it before.” Thanks, Trump. Your cruelty has highlighted areas of need and good people are stepping up.