

Northeast Church Protects Rights Advocate

Given sanctuary as authorities try to deport him

(AP) — A community activist who first came to the U.S. from El Salvador nearly two decades ago spent the weekend hidden in a Portland church, becoming the latest immigrant to seek sanctuary as authorities try to deport him.

Francisco Aguirre, who has lived illegally in the U.S. for 19 years and has two children who are American citizens, is facing deportation due to a drug trafficking conviction 15 years ago and a previous deportation, authorities said.

Aguirre, 35, is now the coordinator of the Voz Workers' Rights Education Project, a Portland nonprofit that runs a day labor center. He's a well-known immigrant rights organizer and a musician who performs songs about social justice.

His case marks the first time in recent years that an immigrant has been granted sanctuary inside an Oregon church. During the past decade, as reform has stalled, churches around the country have offered refuge to immigrants who lack legal status.

Experts estimate about 300 congregations nationwide are willing and ready to give sanctuary to such immigrants. Immigration officials generally do not arrest people inside churches and other places of worship.

Aguirre has vowed to remain at Augustana Lutheran Church in northeast Portland until he's able to resolve his immigration case.

His immigration lawyer Stephen Manning says Aguirre is in the process of obtaining a U-visa, a special document for crime victims who help authorities investigate or prosecute cases.

Aguirre says he first entered the U.S. illegally in 1995. He worked as a day laborer and helped found the nonprofit group that operates the day labor center. Aguirre also runs a computer repair business from his home.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said Aguirre was deported to El Salvador in 2000 following a conviction for drug trafficking offenses. He then unlawfully re-entered the country, spokesman

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Francisco Aguirre, coordinator of Portland's Voz Workers' Rights Education Project, is surrounded by a group of supporters at a local church as fights deportation. (AP photo)



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