

**Mayor Wellington E. Webb
Immigration Press Conference
Saturday, March 7, 1998
Rosa Linda Mexican Café
2005 W 33 Ave**

Thank you all for coming this morning. First, I want to acknowledge and thank our hosts, Rosa Linda and Virgilio Aguirre, and their five children, for sharing their wonderful restaurant with us. Rosa Linda, as many of you know, is a leading voice in Denver for children, for education, and for neighborhoods. I appreciate the good work you do, Rosa Linda, as a Head Start Commission Member, as a Community Coach with the Denver Workforce Initiative, and in so many other areas.

One half century ago, Denver Mayor Quigg Newton established the city's first Commission on Human Relations. While common by today's standards, the creation of this committee was an act of historic importance – an affirmation of tolerance during a time of widespread intolerance. This was a time, 1947, when large sectors of Denver's immigrant and minority population faced chronic discrimination in the provision of our city's most basic services – public works, public health, and public safety.

Mayor Newton's gesture was one step in Denver's long and determined journey toward economic and social fairness for all of the City's residents, including those who are foreign-born. Fifty years later, under vastly improved circumstances, the challenge of eradicating intolerance remains.

Today, intolerance toward immigrants is rarely reflected in acts of hatred and violence, such as we experienced recently with the despicable murder of Oumar Dia. More often, it is reflected in misconceptions.

Let me emphasize a few points with regard to Denver's immigrant community:

*** Number One: We are all immigrants or descendants of immigrants, except for our American-Indian residents. In 1900, 25,000 Denverites were foreign-born. In 1990, the number was 35,000, of which approximately 14,000 are naturalized citizens. The immigrant population constituted a higher percentage of the total population at the turn-of-the-century than it does today.**

*** Number Two: Denver's immigrant population is more diverse than many realize. In the homes and streets of our vibrant neighborhoods you will hear Spanish, French, Italian, German, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Greek, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese, and numerous other languages.**

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*** Number Three: Even in strictly economic terms, immigrants are a net gain for the taxpayer. When measuring the impact on ALL levels of government – federal, state, and local – immigrants generate an estimated annual net surplus of \$25 to \$30 billion.**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, compared to native-born citizens, new immigrants are:

- **more likely to be employed**
- **more likely to start new businesses; and**
- **more likely to save a larger share of their earnings.**

And consider small businesses, which create 80% of the new jobs available in the United States each year. Nearly 1 out of every 5 of these small businesses is started by an immigrant.

In a poll conducted by the Wall Street Journal, 4 out of every 5 U.S. economists characterized the impact of immigrants on economic growth as “very favorable”.

We see this favorable economic impact in Denver. Look at:

The hundreds of jobs, and sales tax revenues, produced by Asian-owned businesses throughout the Federal and Alameda business corridor; and

The huge neighborhood business revitalization produced by Latino-owned businesses in the Santa Fe Drive commercial district; and

The efforts made by Denver’s Greek community to improve our East Colfax business district.

Tradition, Hope, and Change

In their history of Colorado, Professors Abbott, Leonard, and McComb describe the immigrant experience at the beginning of the 20th century:

“First generation immigrants faced two directions”, they write, “toward Old World pasts filled with tradition, and to New World futures, fraught with uncertainty, filled with hope, demanding of change.”

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Tradition, hope, and change. These are the invigorating qualities that Denver's immigrants still bring to the City. We will be hearing from four of these immigrants today:

*** Anatoly Yuffa, who fled the anti-Semitism of Soviet Russia with his family when he was 14 years old, eventually finding refuge and opportunity in Denver. Anatoly, who is known as Tony now, started as a dishwasher; today he is the owner of two successful businesses, and a father of two beautiful daughters. Over the past few years, Tony's shoe-repair stores have undertaken the "Shoes to Share" project, collecting and repairing thousands of pairs of shoes, at his own expense, for the Denver Rescue Mission. And,**

*** Lalo Delgado. Lalo came to this country at the age of 13, from a village in Chihuahua, Mexico. In the 1950s, as a young man in El Paso, Texas, he courageously organized efforts to open up the white-only theaters to the African-American community.**

We are fortunate that Lalo moved to Denver three decades ago. Since then, he has dedicated himself to fighting for immigrants and migrant workers, and producing award-winning poetry and short stories.

*** Jae Ahn is Deputy-Director of the Asian-Pacific Development Center, which annually serves two thousand low-income Asians in the Denver area. Jae immigrated to Denver from Seoul, Korea in 1981. On behalf of the Asian-Pacific Development Center, she has provided a wide range of programs, including employment training, health promotion, elderly outreach, youth mentorship, and after-school initiatives. And,**

*** Tsegaye Hailu. Tsegaye is a hydro-geologist for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He was born and raised near the town of Axum, Ethiopia, which I had the pleasure of visiting in 1995. Axum is a Sister City to Denver, and Tsegaye chairs that committee.**

Among his many volunteer activities, Tsegaye established a wonderful non-profit organization which helps poor communities around the world with drinking water and sanitation problems.

Restoring Fairness

Let me now turn to the federal welfare legislation of 1996, which I believe was rooted in misconceptions about legal immigrants. I support the major program changes that emphasized work over welfare. However, a portion of the federal budget savings was achieved by denying public assistance benefits to elderly and disabled legal immigrants. These reforms affecting legal immigrants had nothing to do with encouraging work.

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Last fall, the President and Congress restored Supplemental Security Income to some legal immigrants, those who had arrived in this country before August 22, 1996. And Colorado, which exercised the option granted to states, has extended Medicaid eligibility to legal immigrants who had arrived before August 22, 1996. But newly arrived immigrants remain excluded from all federal means-tested benefits. And the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 did not restore food stamps eligibility for legal immigrants, causing undue hardship to nearly one-half million children and senior citizens.

As Mayor, I strongly support President Clinton's proposal to restore food stamps for the most vulnerable groups of legal immigrants, and to give states the option to restore Medicaid eligibility to immigrant children regardless of when they arrived in the United States.

Citizenship Backlog

Another serious challenge on the national level is the delay in naturalizing prospective citizens. An estimated 1.7 million applicants are waiting to become citizens; they can expect to wait an average of 21 months. This is not acceptable. Last month, the Immigration and Naturalization Service announced a long-overdue plan to accelerate the naturalization process while reducing fraud. The federal government has the technological capability to grant citizenship immediately upon determination of eligibility. This issue must not become mired in partisan posturing. The INS should move aggressively, and quickly, to implement this important reform.

Denver's Commitment

Denver will not allow the divisive policies and bureaucratic delays on the national level to undermine our firm commitment to the delivery of services to all of our residents. This is a pledge that I have made from the day I assumed office, and it is a commitment that remains a fundamental principle of my administration. We are an international City, enriched and energized by our immigrant population. And while we are disappointed by the inequities of the federal legislation, we do not accept its consequences passively. Responding to the loss of food stamps, for example, the Denver Department of Social Services, in cooperation with Denver food banks, has established an emergency food voucher program. It places food on the tables of those legal immigrant families who had depended on food stamps.

Today, I am issuing an Executive Order on Immigration Policy. James Mejia, Director of Denver's Agency for Human Rights and Community Relations, will distribute copies. This Executive Order says:

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*** that the City and County of Denver cherishes the diversity of its native-born and foreign-born residents**

*** that the federal welfare reform legislation unfairly impacts legal immigrants, that it has the potential to be misinterpreted by public officials and administrators, and to foster a climate of intolerance and discrimination, and that it must be modified further;**

*** and that the City "will not tolerate unlawful discrimination in any form" and "will vigorously preserve the legal rights of all of its residents."**

Demagogues and hate mongers will always be among us. They are a tiny, but malignant minority requiring our constant vigilance. But they do not define who we are as a city, and as a community. Denver, which has been nationally recognized for so many qualities as the most livable, the most lovable, the most business-friendly, and the most family-friendly, can pride itself on another distinction. We are, and must always remain, a City of faith, tolerance, and hope.

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EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 116**TO:** All Agencies Under the Mayor**FROM:** Mayor**DATE:** March 6, 1998**SUBJECT:** Immigration Policy

- I. The City and County of Denver is an ethnically and culturally pluralistic city. We cherish this diversity for enhancing the quality of life in our community. As Denver emerges as an international city in a global economy, we can anticipate that foreign born residents will continue to make Denver their home. We welcome all to share Denver's warm hospitality. We must respect this diversity and assure that the human rights of our residents are protected.
- II. The federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 divided legal immigrants, for the first time in modern history, into two distinct categories with regard to public benefits: qualified and unqualified immigrants. The Balanced Budget Act of 1997, while restoring some means-tested benefits for legal immigrants arriving before August 1996, did not change this fundamental shift in U.S. immigration policy. This distinction among legal immigrants unfairly impacts many of Denver's children, senior citizens, and disabled residents, and has the potential to be misinterpreted by public officials and administrators and to foster a climate of intolerance and discrimination.
- III. This Executive Order establishes and emphasizes that the city strongly opposes this change in federal immigration policy, that the City will not tolerate unlawful discrimination in any form, and that the City remains firmly committed to the delivery of services to all of its residents.
- IV. The City will vigorously preserve the legal rights of all of its residents. In addition, we will strongly encourage partners, such as the Denver business community, Denver Public Schools, public and private medical facilities, institutions of higher education and neighboring municipalities to adopt a similar policy.

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Approved for Legality:

Daniel S. Muse

Daniel Muse
Attorney for the City and County
of Denver

Approved:

Wellington E. Webb

Wellington E. Webb
Mayor

Bruce Baumgartner

Bruce Baumgartner
Manager of Public Works

Theresa M. Donahue

Theresa Donahue
Manager of Environmental Health Services

Fidel Montoya

Fidel Montoya
Manager of Safety

Cheryl Cohen

Cheryl Cohen
Manager of Revenue

Philip A. Hernandez

Philip A. Hernandez
Manager of Social Services

Betty Jean Brooks

Betty Jean Brooks
Manager of Parks and Recreation

Alonzo Matthews

Alonzo Matthews
Manager of General Services

James DeLong

James DeLong
Manager of Aviation