

My name is Lauri Bennett Ogumoro; I am a U.S. citizen originally from the state of Oregon. I have lived and worked in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands for the past 25 years. I am married to a Carolinian from the island of Saipan. My husbands' ancestors navigated the open ocean in canoes to come to Saipan. They came in the early 1800's after their islands, between Yap and Chuuk (now known as the Federated States of Micronesia), were devastated by two consecutive typhoons. In Carolinian the word for Saipan is "Saipol" meaning "empty place". At the time the Carolinians settled on Saipan it was indeed an empty place. The Spaniards had removed the Chamorro population from the islands north of Guam in order to colonize all the residents of the Mariana Islands on Guam.

I am a professional social worker. I have a Masters Degree in Social Work from the University of Hawaii, 1989. I am a member of the National Association of Social Workers, and the Academy of Certified Social Workers. I worked as a social worker for the Commonwealth government for twenty years, most of those years as a medical social worker at the Commonwealth Health Center. I am now employed as a social worker with Karidat, which was formerly known as Catholic Social Services. I am the manager of Guma' Esperansa – House of Hope, the shelter for battered women and their children on Saipan.

I would like to preface my testimony with the understanding that the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands is my home. The Commonwealth is a beautiful place with proud peoples of the Chamorro and Carolinian cultures. I have been blessed to live on the island of Saipan and to raise my children amongst a proud and traditional Carolinian family. I arrived on Saipan in June of 1982. This was shortly before the advent of the garment industry. The population of Saipan at that time was a little over 16,000.

My testimony is not to offer solutions, but to offer a glimpse of the conditions of many living in the Commonwealth. I will not offer my personal opinions as to the issue of federal take-over of CNMI immigration. I am aware that some in the Commonwealth have claimed that I have already faxed in my statement to this Committee saying the federal government should take over local immigration. This is not true. I would also like to make it clear to this Committee that there are many dedicated individuals working in the CNMI Immigration and Labor Departments, the Department of Public Safety and the Office of the Attorney General. These individuals work closely with Karidat to assist the victims I will describe in my testimony. I offer this testimony as a social worker and as an advocate for women. I humbly offer this testimony with the support of His Excellency Bishop Tomas A. Camacho in order to share with you some of the stories of the women and children served by Karidat. Bishop Camacho has asked that I share with you the facts, without editorializing.

Karidat, which means charity in Chamorro, is the only non-profit non-governmental social services agency in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Karidat operates under the auspices of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Chalan Kanoa. Karidat celebrated its first 25 years of service to the community in May 2005. Karidat runs several community-based programs such as individual and family counseling

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services, the House of Manhoben Teen Center, the Victim Hotline, the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, the Victim Advocacy Program, the Guest Worker Assistance Program which ran from October 1995 to November 2005, and Guma' Esperansa.

The Guest Worker Assistance Program operated as a safety net for non-resident workers with valid labor complaints to get assistance with food and shelter while they waited for resolution to their labor complaints and/or sought new employment. Funding for the Guest Worker Assistance Program came from the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Insular Affairs. Non-resident workers referred to the Guest Worker Assistance Program (GWAP) reported such complaints as unpaid wages and/or overtime, illegal deductions for medical care and housing, unlawful termination, and discrimination. Some reported losing their jobs due to pregnancy or the inability to keep up with the quota system i.e.: having to sew 500 sleeves a day. Most of the labor complainants seeking help from Karidat had labor complaints dealing with unpaid wages and overtime pay. Below is an overview of the numbers of clients served by the GWAP.

Guest Worker Assistance Program - # of persons served

| Year | Food | Rent |
|------|------|---------------|
| 1996 | 556 | Not available |
| 1997 | 413 | Not available |
| 1998 | 955 | Not available |
| 1999 | 1162 | 278 |
| 2000 | 1321 | 192 |
| 2001 | 1089 | 195 |
| 2002 | 716 | 155 |
| 2003 | 1482 | 290 |
| 2004 | 940 | 82 |
| 2005 | 700 | 0 |

Founded in 2001, Guma' Esperansa, is the newest program operated by Karidat. With the opening of Guma' Esperansa the Commonwealth had its first permanent shelter for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault and their children. Funding for shelter personnel and operations comes mainly from two competitive federal grants: Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) and Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) STOP funding. The shelter also receives funding from several other smaller grants, such as the Emergency Shelter Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; and the United Way Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program.

In late 2005 Guma' Esperansa received funding from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops – Refugee and Migration Program to provide funds to support the activities of daily living for the victims of human trafficking in our care. In July 2006 the funding for our services to victims of human trafficking was transferred to the Hawaii American Samoa Anti-Trafficking Services grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime. Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth

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of the Northern Mariana Islands were included in this grant. Guma' Esperansa learned in August 2006 that our grant application for one of the ten discretionary grants for from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime, Human Trafficking Victim Services was awarded. We received the funding in November 2006. Thus our funding was once again transferred, this time to a grant specifically designed for Guma' Esperansa and the Northern Mariana Islands.

Guma' Esperansa also enjoys a wide base of support from the community in the Commonwealth through such things as canned food and clothing drives, sponsorship of our Real Men Calendar, and monetary donations. As the only shelter for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking in the Commonwealth, Guma' Esperansa provides free and confidential shelter services to victims and their children regardless of citizenship, ethnicity, or immigration status.

The ethnic breakdown of clients and their children seeking refuge at Guma' Esperansa mirrors the ethnic diversity of the Commonwealth. Filipinos, followed by Chamorro, then Chinese women are the three largest ethnic groups served through the shelter. Because of the ethnic diversity of the CNMI population Guma' Esperansa has maintained a staff that can readily provide services in the predominant languages spoken such as Chamorro, Carolinian, Tagalog, Palauan, and Chuukese. Guma' Esperansa has contracts and/or relationships with Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Thai translators that are available to provide translation services to shelter clients.

Below is a breakdown of population by ethnicity, as reported in the CNMI's 2000 Census of Population and Housing by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau:

Table1.
 CNMI 2000 Census of Populations by Ethnicity

| Ethnic Group | Population | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Indigenous:</i> | <i>17,401</i> | <i>25.1</i> |
| Chamorro | 14,749 | 21.3 |
| Carolinian | 2,652 | 3.8 |
| <i>Other Micronesian:</i> | <i>4,600</i> | <i>6.6</i> |
| Chuukese (FSM) | 1,394 | 2.0 |
| Kosraean (FSM) | 56 | .1 |
| Marshallese | 112 | .2 |
| Palauan | 1,685 | 2.4 |
| Pohnpeian (FSM) | 640 | .9 |
| Yapese (FSM) | 204 | .3 |
| Other Pacific Islander | 509 | .7 |
| <i>Asian:</i> | <i>38,610</i> | <i>55.8</i> |
| Bangladeshi | 873 | 1.3 |
| Chinese | 15,311 | 22.1 |
| Filipino | 18,141 | 26.2 |
| Japanese | 952 | 1.4 |
| Korean | 2,021 | 2.9 |

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| | | |
|--|---------------|-------------|
| Nepalese | 300 | .4 |
| Other Asian | 1,012 | 1.5 |
| Other | 8,610 | 12.5 |
| Caucasian | 1,240 | 1.8 |
| African American | 41 | .1 |
| Other (Other race or ethnic group; combination of 2 or more ethnic groups) | 7,329 | 10.6 |
| Total | 69,221 | 100 |

The ethnic diversity of the CNMI presents many challenges to social service providers in terms of language barriers, cultural differences, and labor and immigration concerns. There are also differing attitudes regarding domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking within both the indigenous and non-resident communities.

Domestic Violence:

Based on the last two years, 54 % of women served through Guma' Esperansa are immigrant women. Most of these women met their husbands on Saipan. Many are married, some are living in common-law relationships, and most have children. About 15 percent of these women are non-resident women living in common-law relationships with or are married to their non-resident husbands.

Sometimes the battered woman tells us she is illegal and therefore usually chooses to only stay briefly in the shelter. We have successfully worked with the Attorney General's Office and the Department of Immigration to assist several women to regain their legal status in the Commonwealth. Some battered immigrant women report that they do not have a job but are "sponsored" by friends or relatives. Sponsorship arrangements are strictly prohibited by CNMI Labor regulations, but they are not uncommon nonetheless. The "sponsor" signs documents indicating that he or she will be the employer, even though there is no genuine job or wages. Finding a sponsor gives these women the appearance of legal status as non-resident workers so they are able to remain in the CNMI. This allows non-resident women to stay home and care for their children, as many cannot afford to pay for childcare. Meanwhile the father of their children (also a non-resident worker) works to support the entire family. One woman reported paying \$2000.00 to a "sponsor" only to have the sponsor run away with her money. She had no recourse for the recovery of her money since the arrangement was prohibited in the first place. This particular woman remains "illegal". When a non-resident worker has a family, they often do not live in company-sponsored barracks, since children may not be permitted. Instead he may rent a room for his wife and children. Many times these low-cost rentals have communally shared bathrooms and kitchens. Stress on these families can be tremendous and often leads to domestic violence.

There is no provision in current CNMI Immigration law to protect battered non-resident women married to U.S. citizen spouses. Therefore the threats by a U.S. citizen spouse to

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send an immigrant (non-resident) woman back home is more than just words. These are the kinds of threats that force women to stay in abusive relationships. The threat of taking their U.S. citizen children (since children born in the CNMI are U.S. citizens) to Guam or the U.S. mainland so she will not be able to see them is also very real. I have known of many such threats and of several cases in which this has actually been done. In some cases these mothers, although they have committed no crime, may never be able to see their children again. There was talk several years ago that the CNMI Immigration law would be amended to allow battered women to self-petition as an Immediate Relative in the Commonwealth if they could show that their U.S. citizen spouse was convicted of domestic violence. This would have been a step in the right direction, but I am sure that most advocates for victims of domestic violence will tell you that this threshold, a criminal conviction, would be too high. The vast majority of domestic violence cases in the CNMI, as elsewhere, do not involve criminal charges. It was felt, however, that the threshold of a criminal conviction was necessary to avoid fraudulent claims of abuse in order for women to stay in the Commonwealth.

It has only been in the last few years that battered non-resident women married to U.S. citizens in the Commonwealth have been encouraged to self-petition for lawful permanent residence status in the United States under the provisions of the Violence Against Women Act. (This is commonly known as a VAWA petition.) A few years ago, I personally escorted an immigrant woman to get legal assistance to file a VAWA petition as a battered spouse. Unfortunately at that time we were told that U.S. Immigration law did not apply in the Commonwealth and therefore the attorney advised her that she needed to get her abusive husband to petition for her to get a green card. This particular woman's husband had broken her left femur bone. She had endured ongoing threats and abuse, as well as child abuse to her five-year-old son who had been adopted by her husband. Typical of abusive spouses, the husband had no intention of helping her improve her immigration status, and the woman remained in a dangerous situation for many more months. Fortunately, another victim in a similar situation who did not have access to discouraging legal advice took the initiative to complete the VAWA self-petition process and was successful. Lawful permanent residency to the U.S. has been granted to her and subsequently to several others. This gives us renewed hope that U.S. Immigration law in at least this respect protects immigrant women in the Commonwealth. I can also report that advocacy to the CNMI Immigration Director and the past Attorney General on individual cases of battered immigrant women to renew their CNMI Immediate Relative status without their spouses' consent has been successful. This has given these women time to consider their options, including the possibility of preparing a VAWA self-petition.

In November 2006 a 39-year-old Chinese woman was brought to the shelter by police officers assigned to the domestic violence unit. They told us this woman was a victim of domestic violence. Through translators we learned she had been on Saipan for almost one month. She spoke no English and had visible bruises on her arms and head. Through the translator it was learned that she came into Saipan on a tourist permit with the purpose of marrying a U.S. citizen. It seems a cousin already on Saipan who worked

in a garment factory arranged the marriage. The cousin told this woman that this was the fastest way for her to get a job on Saipan because she would become IR (Immediate Relative status) when she got married then she could get a job. When asked why she came to Saipan this woman told us through the translator "to work and make babies". This woman left the shelter before we could assist her with a protective order. She told us she was afraid of getting her cousin in trouble. This same woman returned to the shelter just two days later, telling us she was afraid of her husband because he continued to hurt her. She told us she needed to get away from her husband and that her cousin was going to find her a new place to live. She again left the shelter before we could help her. Is this story indicative of more out there? I do not know. What I do know is that these women are vulnerable and afraid to utilize the system that is designed to protect them.

Human Trafficking:

In May 2005 Guma' Esperansa took in its first victim of human trafficking. At the time we knew little about human trafficking or the services needed by the victims. We had to learn fast. Unfortunately the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands is not immune to the modern day form of slavery known as human trafficking. Our idyllic tropical islands have seen several trials in recent months in both the local and federal district courts of women who were brought to our islands and forced into prostitution by their traffickers. In the year 2006 Guma' Esperansa served thirty victims of human trafficking from four cases identified through local law enforcement. This number does not include those victims of human trafficking discovered by federal law enforcement. These victims were subsequently sent to Guam for safe shelter. A prayer that was found in the back of a journal kept by one of the sex trafficking victims rescued on Saipan can best describe the needs of the victims and why human trafficking is a priority of the federal government.

Dearest Lord:

Please help my job everyday. I need money for my family. I know you knew it already. So, I hope I will be able to meet a generous person. Please provide me that kind person. Lord I hope you understand me. As you know, I want to go back to the Philippines. I do not like it here anymore, so please speed up every single day that passes by. Please help me. Please do not forsake me. Please guide me down here.

The first victim of human trafficking assisted by Guma' Esperansa, is a 43 year old Chinese woman who ran away from her employer after having been assaulted. This woman flagged down a passer-by who brought her to the police station. The police escorted her to the hospital due to her injuries and subsequently brought her to Guma' Esperansa for safe shelter that same day. Through the assistance of translators we learned the details of X's life in the Commonwealth. X was recruited to work as a babysitter. After working for her employer for one month in China, her employer asked X to come to Saipan to work for her. X's contract states that she was a waitress on the island of Tinian. X's CNMI Labor contract was never translated to her; she signed her

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contract trusting her employer's explanation to her. She arrived on Saipan in late December 2004. During her employment on Saipan, X states she worked 20 to 21 hours a day, cooking, cleaning, and babysitting. She never had a day off. She not only cleaned her employer's apartment and watched her baby but she also cleaned another apartment where other employees were staying. X was promised that she would receive \$250.00 a month and that her employer would pay all of her processing fees. She was paid twice, but deductions were taken from her salary each time; her total net pay for four months of work was about \$255.00. X was also forced to sign a promissory note saying she owed her employer for her plane ticket and processing fees. She was assaulted by her employer and others working for her employer on at least four different occasions. X begged her employer to send her home to China. X was told that if she tried to runaway, her employer would find her, "dump" her body into the ocean, and tell her family in China that she was smuggled to Guam. The criminal trial against X's trafficker has not been completed. X's trafficker is charged with one count of assault and battery. A civil case has been filed in the U.S. District Court of the Northern Mariana Islands but is stayed pending the completion of the criminal case.

In September 2005 Guma' Esperansa took in two young women recruited in the Philippines to come to Saipan to work as waitresses for three months. Both women were promised to be paid \$400.00 a month. They were brought in legally on tourist permits. These young women were never told that tourist permits would not allow them to lawfully work. The applications for tourist permits were submitted to CNMI Immigration claiming the young women were respectively the niece and the girlfriend of their male employer/trafficker. Both arrived on Saipan early in the morning and were shown to their rooms in the massage/karaoke parlor and told to rest. In the afternoon of the day of their arrival each was given a box of condoms and a box of small yellow pills. They were instructed to take one pill every day. Later that afternoon a Korean male and "Mamasan" knocked on the door of one of the young women. "Mamasan" told her that the Korean was a good man and would take care of her. This victim recounts how she was terrified and shocked when she realized what was happening. She states she started crying. The Korean male then raped her. All in all four men raped her on the first day she was arrived on Saipan. Much the same happened to the second young woman. Both women stated they pleaded with Mamasan to give them the waitress job that was promised. One of the victim's states she even begged to be a "washer woman". Mamasan threatened them if they did not comply. She told them she would turn them into the police. Mamasan told them that they needed to work as prostitutes because they owed her money, and if they didn't pay her back they would never see their families again. Mamasan took their passports and travel documents. The two young women stated they would sometimes find themselves locked inside the massage pallor. These young women stated that they were forced to work as prostitutes for almost ten days. Let is until they escaped with the help of several young Filipino males they actually met in the massage pallor.

The two young women in this case were able to testify at the criminal trial against their traffickers. The traffickers were found guilty on all counts but two. They have been

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sentenced to three years in jail, ordered to pay an \$8,000.00 fine and to serve 7.5 years probation. They are also barred from ever hiring non-resident workers again and their business license was revoked. The female trafficker in this case, Mamasan, a Chinese national, has been ordered deported after serving her three-year sentence. In December 2006 this particular Chinese woman was found amongst a group of 16 Chinese nationals on a boat in CNMI waters that was intercepted by local and federal authorities as the group was allegedly trying to be smuggled to Guam.

In March 2006, Guma' Esperansa began serving seven young Filipino women, two of which were still minors at the time they were rescued. It is alleged that at one time this particular club employed as many as seven minors. These young women's employer/trafficker operated two nightclubs on Saipan. In April 2006 a task force of Law Enforcement Officers rescued eleven more young Filipino women from this same nightclub. These young women were all recruited from the provinces of the Philippines with the promise of earning 500,000 Philippine pesos (about \$10,000 U.S.) to be exotic dancers at the bars operated by their traffickers. Because several of these young women were minors and/or too young to work in a bar in Saipan, the traffickers told them to get birth certificates saying they were 21 years old. With the promise of 500,000 Philippine pesos for one year's work these young women were able to secure the needed birth certificates. They then gave these birth certificates to their traffickers who used their connections in the Philippines to get passports made using the fraudulent birth certificates. Before leaving the Philippines all of these young women were forced to sign a waiver of their personal rights on Saipan. Their traffickers told them that this was for their protection. The women were subsequently locked in their barracks during non-working hours. They were all forced to cash their paychecks in the "bar" where deductions were taken from each paycheck for such things as costume rentals, and bed sheets. One young woman told us she paid almost \$600.00 to rent her bed sheets. These young women were also forced to do more than just perform exotic dances. They were forced to perform lewd acts with customers against their will. When they complained that they did not want to perform such acts the traffickers told them that the man was a "good customer" and threatened them with more deductions from their pay or to be sent home if they did not comply. Promised commissions for "ladies drinks" were never paid.

These young women told us they thought they could be "exotic dancers" for one year. After all they were promised 500,000 Philippine pesos, a lot of money to help their families back home. These young women's employers/traffickers are being charged with 227 counts of "unlawful exploitation of a minor; involuntary servitude; sexual servitude of a minor; human trafficking; immigration fraud; unlawful exploitation of a minor; solicitation, conspiracy; transporting persons for the purposes of prostitution; employment of illegal aliens; harboring illegal aliens; aiding, abetting and encouraging illegal entry; assisting illegal aliens; and conspiracy". This is the first case charged under the Commonwealth's Anti-Human Trafficking Law. The trial is set for February 2007.

All of the women from this case are pre-certified victims of human trafficking. They are now living in apartments around the island, which are subsidized by Karidat through a

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U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime grant for service to victims of human trafficking. Despite living away from the shelter, shelter staffs are in touch with most of the women on a daily basis. Karidat assisted these women to find jobs, now most are working. Several of the women have been attending Adult Basic Education classes in order to earn a high school diploma.

On December 4, 2006 a group of seven women from China arrived on Saipan after having been recruited for work in Saipan. Each paid \$6000.00 (US) to recruiters in China for their job in Saipan. The women understood that two were to work as commercial cleaners, two were to work in a restaurant, and three would work in a garment factory. Upon arrival in Saipan they were told that the jobs they were promised did not exist. Instead, they were offered work as prostitutes and club workers on Tinian. Six of the women sought the help of authorities the next day. The six were brought to Guma' Esperansa for safe shelter. The seventh remains with the alleged employer/traffickers. This case remains under investigation at this time. The women remain anxious and frustrated. The reality that they may return to China without being able to pay back those they borrowed money from to get the job in Saipan is always in their minds. The following is a translated statement they wrote to the CNMI Labor Department:

Dear Labor Department Staff,

One of the girls had already gone back to China. Our case had still not being processed. We are wondering what's the explanation from your side. You might say that there is not enough evidence or you are still investigating about it. At least we had the right to know what's going on. The rest of us can only get a return ticket home. If that's the end, we'll be very disappointed.

Even though you always said that our money was cheated in China, but if there were no connection from Saipan, how could we get here? Now the Chinese New Year is coming we are all hurry up and want to be back home. But if by that time all we get are just return tickets without further follow-up, then why not just cancel our case. That will save your time!

If there is anything that we wrote above has offended you, please excuse us.

Letter signed by the five remaining victims from this case.

Is this the tip of the iceberg? Are these isolated cases? There is some belief on island that the women who report such schemes as discussed above say they are victims of human trafficking in order to get the benefits. Not all victims of human trafficking, contrary to popular belief, want to go to the United States. They are not looking for T-Visas, most have never heard of such a thing. Unfortunately the reality is that due to their being a victim of human trafficking it may no longer be safe to go back home. This reality is not always easy for victims to comprehend as they long to see families they left behind.

It was reported in the local media in April 2006 that from 1999 to 2005, the number of non-resident workers in the CNMI with permits to work in nightclubs and bars ranged

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between 456 and 679 a year, according to data compiled by the Department of Commerce. It was further reported that the government issued the most permits for these workers in 2005, at 679, an almost 10 percent increase from the previous year's 618 permits. I have had the opportunity to talk with many women over the last few years. Many recounted how they were brought to Saipan to work in nightclubs, bars and karaoke's. Many stated they discovered that when they got to Saipan their job included much more than just being a waitress. Sometimes they were locked in their barracks, some report being escorted to the store and even church. One woman tearfully shared how one day the boss told them that they would now be required to serve customers topless. She told me she refused to serve customers topless because it was not in the contract. She stated that her employer bought her a plane ticket and sent her home to the Philippines the next day. Thus sending a message to the rest of her co-workers that they must do as they are told or they would be sent home. Another woman told me how she came to Saipan to work as a waitress but she was forced into prostitution. She told me she was able to escape by befriending one of the customers who got her out of the club and eventually married her.

When I talk with community members and tell them about human trafficking and what is happening to these young women working in the night clubs the response is much the same, *"Oh he's been doing that for years, or that's just the way it is."* This complacency amongst community members would no doubt be different if these young women were women from the Commonwealth being trafficked into China or the Philippines. Human trafficking is not just about something that happens in far away places. It happens in our own beloved Commonwealth.

Long-term effects of CNMI Labor/Immigration policies on the CNMI:

Perhaps an unintended consequence of the Commonwealths' desire for growth and development is where we are now with a guest worker population that exceeds that of the indigenous/U.S. citizen population. Rapid population growth and development has put stress on island infrastructure and ecosystems. City water is "on" for only a few hours a day in many parts of the island. The public school system does not have enough teachers to meet the needs of an ever-growing student population. Public health and medical services struggle to keep enough doctors and nurses on island to meet the medical needs of the general public. The Medicaid program has over 10,000 cases, and is challenged to pay the medical bills of its clients. Many non-resident workers are afraid to seek medical treatment for fear of losing their job or having their employer deduct their medical expenses from their pay. The criminal justice system is burdened with an increasing robbery and burglary rate. Perhaps this is due to the ever widening economic hardships on island and the competition for a limited number of jobs.

The number of undocumented workers and workers who are "sponsored" living in the Commonwealth ranges from 500 to 5000 depending on who you talk to. Some in the Commonwealth will make the charge that the United States has a lot of undocumented workers too. While this is true, the situations are not really similar. Unfortunately, the

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islands of the Commonwealth do not allow an undocumented worker to move from freely from island to island to find work. The undocumented worker cannot make it back across the border to his or her homeland. Unfortunately, he or she remains on island, most living in plain sight of Commonwealth authorities. Nearly all undocumented non-resident workers in the Commonwealth have children born in the Commonwealth. These children attend Headstart and the public schools. If one of the parents is legal they may try to apply for Medicaid health insurance and food stamps for the children. One must also realize that the majority of the non-resident workers brought to the CNMI are of childbearing age. According to the 1995 Census 95% of the CNMI workforce is a "Guest Worker" or non-resident workforce. Just over half of the CNMI population is of Asian descent; this group is predominately individuals from the Philippines, China, Thailand, and Korea. There is a "melting pot" of guest workers that eagerly come to the Commonwealth seeking a better wage in order to care for their families back home.

Employers within the Commonwealth can readily seek non-resident workers from nearby Asian countries. While it is seemingly easy to bring in guest workers to the Commonwealth, on the other hand it seems very difficult to repatriate these workers to their home country when entry and work permits are expired and the workers are in hiding. Many non-resident workers claim that they have not been paid or have been abused by their employers thus there is an overwhelming backlog of labor cases. Some of these claims may be frivolous but others describe very real violations of human rights and/or of the Fair Labor Standards Act. The sheer number of labor cases to be reviewed and adjudicated is overwhelming. Contract workers continue to be stranded as they wait for employers to pay their back wages and provide them with plane tickets to go home. This may very well lead to exploitation of stranded workers already in the CNMI by unscrupulous employers, illegal sponsors, and human traffickers.

Bishop Tomas A. Camacho wrote so eloquently to all the people in the Commonwealth in his pastoral letter on human rights on the feast of St. Joseph the Worker, May 1, 2006. Bishop Camacho reminded this predominately Roman Catholic community, both resident and non-resident, of Catholic teaching on human rights and justice. If I may paraphrase Bishop Camacho's pastoral letter..."Catholic social teaching emphasizes that no society can be considered truly prosperous if it neglects the needs of the poor and vulnerable". Karidat faces challenges on an almost daily basis to meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable in the CNMI society. Resident and non-resident alike deserve to be treated with respect, dignity and justice.

Many in the Commonwealth are afraid to speak out, for fear of reprisals to themselves or family members. I believe it is a matter of conscience. The abuses described above are not representative of indigenous values nor of Catholic social justice. If we do not speak out to correct the wrongs in our islands we will lose who we are as Chamorros, Carolinians, and Americans.