

Suozzi speaks at immigration forum

November 17, 2009 by KATIE SERIGNESE. Special to Newsday

Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi joined a chorus of speakers Tuesday at an immigration forum advocating for more compassionate approaches to the issue while working to eliminate discrimination and attacks against undocumented immigrants on Long Island.

"What's America about?" asked Suozzi, who was the keynote speaker at the forum held at the Marriott Hotel in Melville. "The most fundamental principle is that men and women are created equal and should be treated with respect and dignity."

The event, "Getting it Right for Long Island: Immigration in the 21st Century," drew about 95 people. It was organized by Long Island Wins and the Immigrant Alliance.

The talk came roughly a year since the killing of [Marcelo Lucero](#), an immigrant who Suffolk police and prosecutors said was stabbed to death in Patchogue by one of seven teenagers who authorities said had sought out Latino men to harass.

That killing raised immigration's already high profile on Long Island, as activists blamed the killing in part on the political climate and a seething anti-immigrant atmosphere.

"Our challenge ahead of us is to change things, and change is tough," Suozzi said, adding that good immigration policy would deter the discrimination that led to Lucero's killing.

Margaret Smyth, director of the Hispanic Apostolate of the North Fork, said immigrants should be integrated properly into the social fabric of Long Island.



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"We live in a society that doesn't know how to win-win," she said, referring to the vast disparities in wealth in places such as the East End. "We live in a 'I win, you lose' society."

She joined Long Island Association director Matthew Crosson, who said an area that appears intolerant to diversity will forfeit intellectual talent and economic capital because smart and capable people tend to want to live in areas free of xenophobia and ethnic or racial conflict.

"They want tolerance," he said.

Chung-Wha Hong, executive director of the New York Immigrant Coalition, said that last year, the [United States](#) deported 350,000 immigrants, a figure that she said increased by 18 percent in 2009.

She proposed some of the measures that have been offered to ease the crisis, such as granting legal status to immigrants who are in the country and revising the policy for issuing visas.

Hong said that visas should be distributed based on projections that forecast the needs of the country's labor force.

"We need unified leadership for immigration reform," Hong said. "But not pro-immigration vs. anti-immigration. We need to bring all people together to tip the scales toward reform."

Roger Clayman, president of the Long Island Federation of Labor, said, "We don't consider people illegal. We say they're here to work."

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