

Testimony

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Chairman, Committee on Immigration Policy

Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce

Subcommittee on Labor, Health  
& Human Services, and Education  
of the  
House Appropriations Committee

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Chairman Natcher and members of the Subcommittee<sup>+</sup>:

I am James K. Batten, President of Knight-Ridder Newspapers. We are all deeply appreciative of your taking the time to hear from us today about the continuing need for refugee assistance in Dade County.

Today I am here in my role as Chairman of the Committee on Immigration Policy of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce. For the past several months our broadbased citizens committee has been gathering information, holding hearings, and meeting with governmental officials in an attempt to assess the impact of the December 14, 1984, immigration agreement between the U.S. and Cuba. Three weeks ago we issued our report of findings and recommendations.

Then 10 days ago Fidel Castro suspended the immigration agreement in response to the first Radio Marti broadcast. We prepared a brief addendum to our report. I ask that both our report and addendum be included in the record of this proceeding.

I am here today not as an expert on federal aid programs but as a concerned citizen of Dade County, Florida, committed to preserving and protecting the quality of life of all the residents of our community. I am here to urge the continued funding of the Targeted Assistance Program based on the special and continuing needs of Dade County.

But first a word about Dade County and its recent history. We are a community in transition, a community recovering but not fully recovered from an extraordinary series of events in 1980 which thus far have shaped the decade in Dade County: the Mariel boatlift, the Haitian influx, soaring drug-related crime, and a major civil disturbance. Few, if any, other communities in recent American history have been so severely buffeted in so short a period of time. Nor has any community, in my opinion, responded so well to such formidable challenges.

In particular, we have struggled (a struggle which continues today) to absorb more than 150,000 Cubans, Haitians and others from Caribbean and Latin America who have come here seeking political or economic refuge. In our workplaces, in our schools, in our medical clinics, we are seeking to open to them the promise of America.

I am happy to report to you that there are many, many success stories involving Mariel Cubans and Haitians. Stories of achievement, advancement, assimilation and compassion. The truth is that for the most part these thousands of new residents of our community are working hard, very hard--sometimes several jobs, day and night--to make a new life, to provide for their families, to become productive citizens.

But there is also another side of the story, one that you may have heard about but one the residents and institutions of Dade County experience every day. Despite the passage of five years, assimilation has been uneven and significant social and economic costs continue to be incurred in our community.

A prime example is the sizable number of new entrants who cannot find work, do not have the necessary language and job skills to be employed and thus live in poverty. And some, thanks to Fidel Castro's "open door policy" of Mariel are either hardened criminals or are mentally ill. These realities have had an intense impact on the major institutions of Dade County, particularly Jackson Memorial Hospital, the public schools, and the criminal justice system.

The Congress has recognized the need to help Dade County address these problems in the past several years under the Targeted Assistance program. By continuing resolution, you have provided funds for fiscal year 1985 for the health care, educational and other needs of refugees in our community. But there is no further authorization or funding provided beyond September 30 of this year. Moreover there are persistent difficulties with the Administration about allocations of appropriated funds as indicated in last year's conference report and in our own experience in recent days.

As our committee report makes clear in greater detail, Dade County urgently needs the continued funding of Targeted Assistance for the next two years at least at the same levels authorized for 1985. Specifically, this would mean \$16 million for each 1986 and 1987 (\$6 million for schools, \$5 million for health, \$2 million for criminal justice programs and \$1 million for day care services.) This is consistent with the version of the Refugee Assistance Extension Act of 1985 (H.R. 1452) which has been approved by the House Judiciary Committee and which continues Targeted Assistance at the \$50 million authorization level for the next two years.

In addition, we urge full funding of a separate but related component of H.R. 1452--"Assistance to States and Counties for incarceration of certain Cuban Nationals". This provision authorizes the Attorney General to reimburse states and counties for the costs of incarcerating Mariel Cubans. It is important to Dade County.

Consider these facts:

\* According to a recent Metro-Dade County study, 15,000 to 20,000 Mariel Cubans in Dade County have criminal records which could prevent them from becoming U.S. citizens. Approximately 2,000 of this group are also violent, mentally disturbed and a danger to themselves and others.

\* In 1984, these individuals--about 1 percent of our County's population--accounted for 10% of the felony bookings and 22% of the misdemeanor bookings in the county and 50% of those mentally incompetent to stand trial.

\* Felony bookings in 1984 increased by 30% over 1983 for Mariel Cubans, thus helping explain why the serious crime rate increased in 1984 in Dade County while declining in Florida and nationally.

\* On any given day in recent months, there were about 400 Mariel Cubans incarcerated in Dade County jails.

The cost to Dade County to house Mariel Cubans for 1985 will exceed \$6 million. The cost to the State of Florida to incarcerate Mariel Cubans convicted of felonies will be an additional \$6 million in 1985.

Full funding of this provision is consistent with the Attorney General's recent statement that the administration would either transfer Mariel prisoners to federal facilities or seek supplemental appropriations to defray the costs incurred by states and counties.

Finally, let me emphasize that although continued Targeted Assistance funding is critical to the needs of Dade County, it is not a panacea or a complete answer to all our problems associated with federal immigration policy. We will continue to address these problems locally and bear most of the costs locally.

Federal assistance has been extremely helpful to Dade County over the past five years. But Federal funds have been limited at a time when enormous energies and resources have been expended by the major institutions of Dade County. Although we are making progress, stubborn problems remain. And the struggle continues.

What is needed now is not a hand-out, but a continuing helping hand from the federal government whose foreign policy set in motion the realities we live with each day.