

Bill Lehman and the Haitian Refugees:

Congressman Lehman first indicated his compassion for the plight of Haitian refugees in 1975. Although the number of Haitians at that time was relatively few, the injustice of their treatment by the Immigration and Naturalization Service was readily apparent. Haitians seeking political asylum in the United States did not receive due process as the INS persisted in treating them differently from other asylum applicants.

He urged the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and International Law to look into this matter. In February, 1976, the subcommittee staff went to Miami and to Haiti. It subsequently issued a report which made specific recommendations for changes in INS procedures. One suggestion was that aliens seeking asylum should be advised of their right to counsel.

The Congressman continued to be supportive of efforts to obtain justice for the Haitians. In 1977, he sponsored a briefing for members and staff on the nature of the Haitian refugee problem. During that year, the number of Haitians arriving in the U.S. began to grow. The fiscal impact of the refugees on Dade County began to grow also because of the lack of legal status given to the Haitians.

In April, 1979, the Congressman went to Haiti in order to gain a better understanding of why so many people were fleeing their homes. The poverty of Haiti is obvious, but he also found that ~~xxx~~ the climate of repression continued in the present regime. What Amnesty International called the "apparatus of repression" was still there.

Upon his return to Washington, Bill Lehman met with INS officials including Commissioner Leonel Castillo, in order to try to persuade the INS not to keep Haitians in jail and to provide them with work authorizations. He also met with members ~~xxx~~ of the Congressional

Black Caucus to urge the CBC to make Haitian refugees a high priority. The Caucus responded by setting up a Haitian Refugee Task Force chaired by the Honorable Shirley Chisholm. Congressman Lehman has cooperated with the Task Force in its efforts to achieve justice and equality for the Haitians.

In August, 1979, Bill Lehman became the first federal elected official to publicly call for granting asylum to the Haitians who had been languishing in Miami. Later he joined with other distinguished Americans in calling on President Carter to exercise his parole authority and grant the Haitians refugee status before the expiration of the parole authority on today, May 15.

With the influx of Cuban refugees during the past several weeks, Bill Lehman did not forget the dire circumstances of the Haitians. In meetings with White House and other Administration officials, he has continually pointed out the inequity of treatment of the Cubans and the Haitians. When the White House assured him that they would receive equal treatment, he went down to Miami to visit the refugee processing centers and compared how the two groups were being treated by the INS. He noted that the Cubans were receiving work authorizations and the Haitians were not. He brought this discrepancy to the attention of INS Acting Commissioner, David Crossland. The disparity has now been corrected and Haitians are being issued work permits on the same basis as the Cubans.