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U.S. immigration reform unlikely this year, lawyer tells forum crowd

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RACINE — There are at least 1,000 undocumented immigrants in Racine County, estimates Pablo Davalos, 47 of Racine, who is a member of the Racine Interfaith Coalition's immigration committee.

"It's a lot," he said.

"I think it's more than that ... A lot more," said Vincent Esqueda, another member of the committee.

Davalos and Esqueda both know people who want to become legal residents, but one of the obstacles in their way is that many would need to go back to Mexico first. Under current law, if someone has lived in America illegally for more than a year, that person is subject to return to their country of origin for 10 years before gaining eligibility to come back, said Jerome Grzeca, an immigration attorney from Grzeca Law Group in Milwaukee.

He and John Sesini, another attorney at the firm, stood before a group of about 100 people at McCarthy Hall at St. Patrick's Catholic Church, 1100 Erie St., on Sunday to answer questions about immigration law and possible reform.

The forum was sponsored by the Racine Interfaith Coalition.

"Most of the people want to do what is right," Grzeca said. "But (there is) no avenue for them."

Many of the illegal immigrants he talks to were brought here as children, before they had a say, he said.

Now they want to know what they can do to stay, he said. But Sesini warns getting a permanent resident card, commonly called a "green card," is not as easy as some make it sound.

One of the problems that the Sesini and Grzeca have seen is that some lawyers promise they can help but really cannot.

"If you have a lawyer guarantee a green card, you should run out of his office," Sesini said.

While answering questions Sunday, Sesini told some people, who said they were living here illegally, that they could end up getting deported.

Davalos said he wants to seek help for those people who want to live here legally, but who don't want to have to go home for 10 years first.

"The main way to take out of the dark those 1,000 people is (if) the president, Congress pressure immigrant reform," said Davalos, whose 14-year-old son, Josue, helped translate for him.

But, Grzeca said the chance of immigrant reform passing this year is very slim. With the November midterm elections coming up, he said, he doubts any controversial bill would pass.

But, he said, people should remain hopeful. That is all some of them have of becoming legal, he said.