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EDITORIAL *Contradictions and Cruelty in U.S. Immigration Policy*

A house divided

Sam Mejia-Reyes and Elida Perez offer a case study on why this nation needs immigration reform. They have lived and worked in the United States since they fled Guatemala with an infant son in 1992. They saved up enough money to buy a house in Novato several years ago. Neither Sam and Elida nor their children — two of whom were born in the United States — has been in even a whiff of trouble.

Yet today the couple will be escorted on a plane for deportation to Guatemala. Immigration and Customs Enforcement sent notice Tuesday that their appeals had been exhausted. They will leave with their 4-year-old daughter, Dulce, a U.S. citizen by birthright. They will leave behind their 13-year-old daughter Helen, also a citizen and thriving in high school, along with their 18-year-old son, Gilbert, who is fighting deportation proceedings of his own.

Under the model of immigration reform advocated by candidate Barack Obama, Sam and Elida could have been offered a pathway to citizenship. Obama talked about a process that would allow undocumented immigrants who otherwise obeyed U.S. laws to remain here and apply for citizenship (albeit behind those who came here legally) if they learn English, catch up on their taxes and pay a sig-

nificant fine. But with the economy reeling and health-care reform dominating his first-year agenda, President Obama has put immigration reform on the back burner.

In the absence of such a pathway, Sam and Elida spent about \$30,000 in legal fees in a desperate effort to keep their family together here. "The Obama administration should look at how its lofty statements about keeping families together are not being implemented in the field, where it's business as usual," their San Francisco attorney, Marc Van Der Hout, said Tuesday. His firm has donated more than \$100,000 in free legal services to the family after taking over the case in March.

"Just imagine what the government has spent on this," Van Der Hout added. "Why is the gov-



Frankie Frost / Marin Independent Journal

Elida Perez (left) and husband Sam Mejia-Reyes (right) are scheduled to be deported to Guatemala today. Their children (from left) Gilbert and Helen will stay here; Dulce will go to Guatemala.

ernment putting such resources into fighting for this deportation?"

In the cruelest twist of all, the family came on the radar of immigration officials only because of mistaken identity: On March 7, 2007, armed federal officers stormed into their house looking for a suspect who was neither a relative nor acquaintance. The U.S. government nonetheless initiated deportation proceedings against the three noncitizens in the family.

An estimated 12 million residents of the United States have come here illegally. For those who work and avoid trouble, enforcement is just a game of chance. Unfortunately, two hard-working Novato parents are paying the price for an immigration policy that is not aligned with reality or the nation's best interest.