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Democrats hear stories of injustice at forum

People from Iowa and other states ask questions about immigration, factory farms and health insurance.

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The people got more microphone time than the politicians.

Five Democratic presidential candidates who spoke Saturday at the Heartland Presidential Forum in Des Moines could do little more than nod and listen as person after person - mostly out-of-state residents - shared emotional stories of perceived injustice.

And the audience of 3,600 did not hesitate to express emotion. As they listened to descriptions of loss of health insurance, the stench of a nearby factory farm, or a family split up by immigration officials, the crowd frequently yelled out: "That ain't right!" and booed.

Hillary Clinton, a U.S. senator from New York, felt the heat of their displeasure after Billy Lawless, a Chicago immigration rights organizer, asked her if she'd commit to giving undocumented workers a path to citizenship in her first 100 days as president.

Clinton, who spoke by telephone, said immigration reform is a top priority.

But Lawless pressed her, asking if she'd do it in the first 100 days.

Clinton said it's up to Congress to pass such reform, but as president she would do as much as possible.

The crowd booed, apparently upset that she wouldn't commit to a 100-days promise.

Chris Dodd, a U.S. senator from Connecticut, was the next candidate to get that question, and he quickly answered: "Absolutely, absolutely."

"One of the great sources of our wealth and strength of our country has been the diversity of our people," Dodd said. "We've never done anything worthwhile as a nation when we've done it out of fear and hate."

Saturday's crowd was hardly just caucus-eligible Iowans. People were bused in from Missouri, Kansas, Illinois and Minnesota, and organizers said people from 33 states were represented as part of a kickoff to the Campaign for Community Values.

The forum was hosted by Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement and Campaign for Community Values, a movement that includes about 100 community organizations.

Only one Republican, businessman John Cox, responded to the invitation, but the hosts' lawyers advised against a solo member of one party because it would appear to be an endorsement.

Also in attendance were former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama

and Dennis Kucinich, a representative from Ohio.

Edwards listened to Virgene Martin of Bridgewater tell about 400 people banding together to fight a factory farm. They failed, and the hog operation is now located next to Martin's own family farm.

"What's happening is these big corporate farming operations, and big multinational corporations that are taking over farming in America ... We see what they're doing to destroy our land," Edwards said. "We see what they're doing to destroy our people and take away our assets."

Edwards, a former trial lawyer, said he beat them in the courtroom, "and I'll beat 'em again."

Irlanda Helgen of Marshalltown got teary-eyed telling Kucinich about a father of five whose wife left for work one day and never came back because of an immigration raid.

"There's no illegal human beings," Kucinich said in English and Spanish.

Kucinich gave a fiery answer about his plan to move the country away from reliance on coal. He talked about a "full-employment economy," where everyone has a job, as well as health care for all, and education for all, from age 3 through college.

And he got wild applause when he said: "We must give those who come to this country a path to legalization."

Emira Palacios of Wichita, Kan., told Dodd she came to the United States 22 years ago as an undocumented worker. She has spent more than \$15,000 during the process of becoming a citizen, and she and her 18-year-old son will vote for first time in the next election.

Dodd said the country has to "have secure borders, obviously."

Later, a moderator cut him off when his answer was over two minutes.

"I get more time here than I get at those debates, though, I can tell you that," Dodd said, chuckling.

Deidra Lewis of Massachusetts, addressing Obama, said her daughter woke up with a burning feeling in her eyes one day. Lewis had to cut back her work hours to deal with her daughter's rare eye disease. In January, she lost her health insurance.

But she enrolled in the State Children's Health Insurance Program, and the public program made the difference between a child going blind or keeping her eyesight.

"Can you look into Alexsiana's eyes and tell me don't all God's children deserve medical care?" she asked.

Obama said yes. Alexsiana crossed the stage to hug him. The audience couldn't hear what he whispered in her ear.

Obama vowed to have a plan in place for health insurance for all Americans by the end of his first term as president.

After a string of stories told by people from the Bronx, Cleveland, Mississippi, South Carolina and California, Debra Carr told Obama she is from Des Moines.

Obama immediately said: "I want you to caucus for me."
