When Leonor Blum founded ¡Adelante Latina! four years ago, she never thought the after-school program would evolve into a safe haven for documented and undocumented immigrant students seeking refuge.

But in many ways, Blum, 72, an Argentine Jew and professor emeritus at Notre Dame at Maryland University, said the program serves more than just its mission of providing college prep and academic enrichment for Baltimore City Hispanic girls in grades 10 through 12.

“There is so much fear in this community about the immigration crisis facing them right now,” said Blum, who came to the U.S. in 1962 to study at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. “I think there is a lot of mistrust about what is going on out there. This has, on the other hand, created a lot of really good activism, which is very rare in this community.”

In Baltimore, as around the rest of the nation, activists and officials say a rush of distress has rocked the immigrant community amid President Donald Trump’s efforts to more strictly impose federal laws. Marisol, one of 28 students in ¡Adelante Latina! who requested that her last name not be used because of her fear of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said she is worried for her friends and family, some of whom are undocumented.

“Even though I was born in the U.S., that doesn’t mean some of the people I’m closest with are not in danger of being deported,” said Marisol, 15, a sophomore at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute. “I would say a lot more people are expressing their feelings and issues toward illegal immigrants, and I feel like that has opened the door for others to attack those people.”

Fear and Action in the Community

The current political climate, which some feel has grown increasingly hostile to
immigrants and refugees, has led Jewish communal leaders and officials to push back. In February, about a month after Trump’s inauguration, Beth Am Synagogue became the first congregation in Baltimore to sign the HIAS “Welcome Campaign” in support of refugees.

“It’s important to remember that the first Jewish journey wasn’t about seeking refuge,” said Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg, spiritual leader of the Reservoir Hill Conservative congregation of 500 families. “It wasn’t about seeking a safe haven from oppression or hate. It was about seeking promise and opportunity.”

In his first few weeks in office, Trump signed executive orders to construct a wall along the country’s Southwest border, to hire more federal immigration agents for deportations, to cut federal grant funding from so-called “sanctuary cities,” to suspend refugee admissions and to ban visitors from six predominately Muslim countries.

So far, however, three of those orders — including the travel ban and proposed federal funding cuts from sanctuary cities — have suffered major setbacks by the courts.

Despite that, there is still a lot of fear within the immigrant community that persists from the unknown. Trump’s policies come at a time when 250,000 immigrants live in Maryland illegally, according the U.S. Census Bureau, ranking the state 12th in the nation for the largest population of unauthorized immigrants.

Eric Seymour is program manager of the Esperanza Center, where ¡Adelante Latina! is among the many programs and services the center offers for undocumented immigrants.

Last year, he said, more than 15,000 people from 100 countries came through the center, which helps immigrants designate a power of attorney and obtain a passport for U.S.-born children, among other services.

"Even in local levels of government, the lives of undocumented immigrants can be a lot better by..."
the way local municipalities and cities and police departments treat these people,” Seymour said. “That’s not something that is dictated by the federal government, but it’s something dictated by the people who live in those communities.”

Beth Am has organized interfaith programs, in part, to compare the recent treatment of undocumented immigrants seeking asylum in the U.S. to the hardships many Jews faced when they left Nazi Germany during World War II. Elected officials, meanwhile, have led rallies for immigrant rights in Annapolis and marched in protest through Southeast Baltimore.

Beth Am, through its social action committee, is in the midst of a three-part event, “Standing with Immigrants & Refugees,” that focuses on the latest developments in U.S. immigration policy, among other topics. The program, set to conclude later this month, has encouraged community members to help immigrants and

“What I want to say is that America is already great. It doesn’t need to be great again. If it wasn’t for America, I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing now.”

— Abdalhamid Ali, a refugee from Darfur, Sudan
minorities in the face of increased xenophobia, Islamophobia and racism spurred by what some say is “hateful” rhetoric by Trump.

Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of HIAS, formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, said community groups are taking on an unprecedented level of importance as outlets where people can turn for answers and assistance.

“We used to help refugees because they were Jewish. But today, we help refugees because we are Jewish,” said Hetfield, who delivered the keynote speech at Beth Am’s April 20 event entitled “An Evening of Discussion & Action.” “Other than that, the work is the same. We’re welcoming refugees to this country.”

At a Baltimore City Council meeting last month, Councilman Zeke Cohen (D-District 1) told the JT that welcoming immigrants to the area remains one of his top priorities. He said encouraging more immigrants to settle in the area provides economic and societal benefits such as helping the city offset its steady population decline and stabilizing the tax base.

As of 2014, more than 46,000 foreign-born people called Baltimore home; less than one-third are undocumented, according to the Open Society Institute (OSI) Baltimore chapter.

“This country belongs to all of us,” said Cohen, who represents Southeast Baltimore. “No one has any more claim to Baltimore or Maryland or the United States than my Honduran neighbor does. We need to figure out how to live with each other and how to support each other in this time of anxiety.”

In 2016, 1,651 people were resettled in Maryland, according to the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), a Baltimore-based agency that, like HIAS, is one of nine agencies that works with the State Department.

Abdalhamid Ali, 36, a refugee from Darfur, Sudan, came to the U.S. in 2013 after escaping violence in his native country. He now volunteers with LIRS as assistant director for outreach, is the co-founder of the Baltimore-based Darfurian Refugee Association and makes his home in the city.

Speaking at Beth Am, Ali said if it wasn’t for the opportunities he has received in the U.S., he wouldn’t be able to send his 11 brothers and sisters in Sudan to college.

“What I want to say is that America is already great,” said Ali, who works as an Uber driver in his spare time, eliciting laughter and clapping from the crowd. “It doesn’t need to be great again. If it wasn’t for America, I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing now.”

The Rev. Kevin Jacobson, assistant director of outreach for LIRS, implored activists at Beth Am to band together to make their presence known.

“I recently learned a new word called tweeting,” Jacobson said, which drew laughter from the crowd. “Use your feet. Get out there and work with all of your
Protecting Immigrants

Some elected officials are urging local law enforcement not to impose federal immigration laws to their fullest extent. Supporters feel that would damage law enforcement’s relationship with the immigrant community, create mistrust and deter immigrants from reporting crime.

“What we don’t want is for federal agencies to support the removal of people who are just trying to live their lives with peace and dignity,” Cohen said. “We want to make sure federal agencies such as ICE understand our position as a city, which is that we want them to support the removal of people who are committing actual crimes. Those activities include violence, drug dealing and gang-related activity.”

Cohen said he is forming what he called a “sanctuary network,” consisting of churches, community associations and schools to provide resources to the immigrant community.

After the federal arrests of three undocumented men in Southeast Baltimore earlier this year, including a father who was arrested after he dropped off his child at a local school, Cohen and advocates announced a new $500,000 legal defense fund in April for undocumented immigrants. Cohen said none of the three men had a criminal record.

The fund, called Safety City Baltimore, was established through OSI Baltimore. Cohen said it will help educate immigrants on their rights, assist in protecting families from being deported or separated and coordinate access to legal counsel to support detained individuals with grounds for defense.

“The person that I am today, I wouldn’t be here if there weren’t other people advocating for me,” said Cohen, whose great-grandmother escaped violence and persecution in Austria during World War II. “So now, it’s my turn to advocate for others. As Jewish people, we should always look out for those who come here for freedom.”

Still, there are some who support more aggressive enforcement measures.

In response to a City Council resolution passed in March calling on ICE officials “to adopt more humane tactics when operating in Baltimore City,” ICE spokesman Matthew Bourke said the agency would continue acting in accordance with laws enacted by Congress.

“ICE officers are charged with enforcing the Immigration and Nationality Act, which includes arresting, detaining and removing those who have violated immigration law,” Bourke told the JT via email. “ICE does not conduct sweeps or raids that target aliens indiscriminately.”

The act of being an undocumented immigrant in the United States is a civil offense, not a criminal one. In many cases, undocumented immigrants entered the country legally but then overstayed or violated terms of their visas.

While illegal border crossings are down more than 60 percent so far under the Trump administration, according to White House officials, Sartre Nbedaneza said he understands why people in situations like his would take the chance of coming to the U.S. without proper documentation.

Nbedaneza, 20, moved to Baltimore two years ago after he and his family escaped genocide in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and obtained legal status in the U.S. Having lived in a squalid refugee camp for more than 10 years, Nbedaneza said he sympathizes with illegal immigrants willing to risk coming to the U.S. to provide themselves and their families a better life.

But in the last few months, Nbedaneza, a senior at Patterson High School, which boasts a high Latino student population, said fear among the immigrant community has intensified.

He also addressed the crowd at Beth Am.

“You don’t see a lot of Latino and undocumented students in after-school programs or doing much of anything when the school day is over,” said Nbedaneza, who has been accepted to Goucher College, Loyola University Maryland and Mount St. Mary’s University. “Staying that late, we’ve heard that it can be really bad for some of those people and put them in danger.”

Trump’s executive orders have left in place former President Barack Obama’s immigration program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which suspends enforcement against children who were brought to the United States.

But Ellen Spokes, program director of ¡Adelante Latina! and a Beth Am congregant, said the students in the program have been more reluctant to apply for DACA status because of Trump’s unpredictable nature.

“They are all incredibly concerned,” said Spokes, who added all of the girls in the program will be first-generation college students. “If it’s not them knowing if their parents will be home when they get home from school, then it’s somebody they know.”

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