

# The Helena Vigilante

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## SUPPORT GROWING FOR MEXICAN MAN WHO SAID HE WAS RAPED IN JEFFERSON COUNTY JAIL

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0 COMMENT

**Audemio Orozco-Ramirez** walked into First United Church of Christ in Billings wearing a thick coat and jeans over chunky winter boots. The few people inside turned to look at him standing there in the doorway beside his interpreter. He was letting his dark beard grow out, but they recognized him immediately as the guy they had seen in the news, a Mexican national who told the press he was recently raped in a Jefferson County Jail cell while being held for deportation.

This was the first of several vigils faith leaders and human-rights activists scheduled across the state to

show support for Orozco-Ramirez. Friends had paid for his plane ticket from Sidney. Almost all the faces were unfamiliar to him so he stood just inside the doorway, hands in his pockets, looking down at his feet until his attorney, Shahid Haque-Hausrath of Helena, walked over and prepped him on the evening's schedule. Orozco-Ramirez, 40, speaks very little English, so virtually every word between them had to pass through the intermediary.



Jefferson County detectives and Immigration and Customs Enforcement supervisory detention and deportation officer Bruce Norum (pictured left) interview a handcuffed Audemio Orozco-Ramirez about his allegation that he was raped in Jefferson County Jail while being held for deportation.

The conversation was a little awkward, but as more and more people filed past him into the church—mostly white Montanans who clearly weren't Spanish speakers—it became apparent that the language barrier didn't matter much. Their presence spoke volumes.

**Orozco-Ramirez's story** first made news in November after his attorney, Shahid Haque-Hausrath of Helena, released investigation materials to the Great Falls Tribune. Those materials included video footage of the ICE-contracted jail cell but there were two large gaps in the recording. One of those gaps coincided with the time Orozco-Ramirez claims an inmate or inmates held him down in his bunk and sexually assaulted him on Oct. 5. Jefferson County and Immigration and Customs

Enforcement officials have said they are investigating the rape allegation.

That isn't good enough for Haque-Hausrath. At a December vigil in Billings, the first of several being held throughout the state, he said he doesn't believe officials were taking the investigation seriously until the story broke—a charge ICE officials and Jefferson County Attorney Matthew Johnson deny—and argued that continued public pressure will help ensure law enforcement officials complete the investigation before deporting his client.

“Audemio needs you to stand up for him because without your help he might not have anyone stand for him or prevent him from being deported,” said Haque-Hausrath.

Several people echoed the need to prevent Orozco-Ramirez's deportation in part because his wife and seven children live in Sidney.

Another organizer, the Rev. Thomas Hall, explained why he supports Orozco-Ramirez despite his immigration status: “We work for peace and justice and wholeness for each and every person no matter who they are or where they are from.”

Later that evening, a visibly uncomfortable Orozco-Ramirez took the stage and told attendees that his jail experience had been very difficult.

“But I'm thankful for all the support you guys are giving me now,” he said through his interpreter. “I don't know what else to say.”

**On December 17**, the second vigil was held at St. Paul's Methodist in Helena. Orozco-Ramirez wasn't present and the event wasn't nearly as big as the one in Billings, but the messages were very similar.

Haque-Hausrath provided background information about how Orozco-Ramirez only came to be in custody because he was a passenger in a car that was stopped for



speeding; local pastors appealed to a common humanity without borders; and attendees sang songs and lit votive candles.

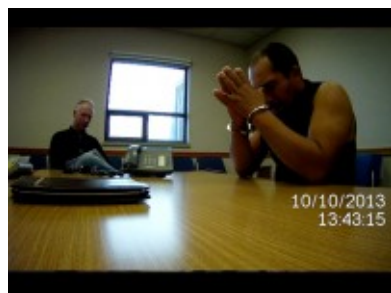
Wilmot Collins, a Montana Immigrant Justice Alliance board member and a naturalized citizen from Liberia, urged attendees to consider the problem of racial profiling but also to think about what they would do for their family if they came from a country without much opportunity and their families were living in the United States.

“What would have happened had my native country Liberia been a border to the United States?” Collins mused.

“I think I could be facing a similar situation because (Orozco-Ramirez) fled his nation for the American dream, he fled for safety, he fled because he wanted more than just what he had. I did the identical same thing. It bothers me because I know I have an accent. It bothers me because I know I am not the regular guy. What would have happened had I been in Sidney?”

Other Montana vigils have been scheduled for Orozco-Ramirez in Bozeman, Butte and beyond.

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