

‘This cannot be normalized’: Blue cities and states rebuff White House over immigration enforcement

The attorney general is threatening criminal prosecutions of officials who refuse to cooperate with federal authorities, but "sanctuary" leaders aren't backing down.

Attorney General Pam Bondi sent letters to more than 30 cities and states demanding they end their “sanctuary” policies. Most responded by refusing to do so. | Francis

NEW YORK — Attorney General Pam Bondi’s fresh threats to Democrat-led cities and states demanding they drop their “sanctuary” policies is being met this week with a collective nope.

Leaders ranging from the governors of California, Illinois and Minnesota to the mayors of New York City, Denver and Boston are standing their ground on limiting cooperation between local law enforcement and federal immigration officers in their responses to [a letter Bondi sent](#) to more than 30 jurisdictions.

“This ends now,” Bondi wrote.

Actually, it doesn’t, the Democrats replied by her Tuesday deadline — uniformly rejecting the Trump administration’s assertion that they’re interfering with federal immigration enforcement.

“That the federal government would insist that Minnesota should divert state resources to do the federal government’s job or help effectuate some kind of misguided political agenda is fundamentally inconsistent with our founding principles as a nation,” Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, the former Democratic nominee for vice president, [said in his letter](#) to the attorney general.

The response letters — culled from POLITICO’s outreach to the 35 cities, counties and states on the Department of Justice’s updated “[U.S. Sanctuary Jurisdiction List](#)” — ranged in tone from antagonistic to diplomatic in [the face of Bondi’s threats](#) of criminal prosecution. [Boston Mayor Michelle Wu](#) hosted a news-conference-turned-anti-Trump rally to trumpet the city’s resistance, while New York City Mayor Eric Adams sent a conciliatory two-paragraph letter via the city’s corporation counsel.

But together, the replies represent uniform Democratic pushback to President Donald Trump’s deportation agenda and reflect a deepening conflict between his administration and the blue cities and states fighting to distance themselves from its aggressive enforcement efforts.

Bondi has vowed swift retribution for local governments failing to comply with the demands of her letter.

“We’re going to work with our other agencies to cut off their federal funding. We are going to send in law enforcement, just like we did during the L.A. riots, just like we’re doing here in Washington, D.C.,” [she told Fox Business](#) this week. “And if they’re not going to keep their citizens safe, Donald Trump will keep them safe.”

Top White House aide Stephen Miller singled out Wu’s defiance for condemnation, [telling Fox News](#) that Boston will now “face not only revocation of funds, not only the loss of taxpayer support, but also potential criminal charges for harboring and smuggling.”

Trump has warned that cities like New York City and Chicago [could be next in line](#) for a federal takeover of their police forces, after he activated the [National Guard in Washington](#) to combat crime and dispatched [federal officers to Los Angeles](#) to quell

protests. And for months across the country, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents have been detaining immigrants en masse, including children and those leaving immigration court hearings. In federal court, the Trump administration is facing off with cities and states over the legality of their “sanctuary” policies.

“Sanctuary” policies differ across the country but broadly restrict local resources from being used for federal immigration enforcement, except in some serious criminal cases. Defenders say the guidelines allow local law enforcement to focus on fighting crime and encourage immigrants to cooperate with police investigations without fear of deportation.

Federal courts, including Trump-appointed judges, have upheld the right of local and state governments to forego cooperation with federal enforcement efforts.

“Oregon’s enacted laws are consistent with the Tenth Amendment and anticommandeering rule,” Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek [wrote in her response](#) to Bondi. “The state does not take on the additional expense or burden to perform federal immigration enforcement as it is the job of the federal government.”

While Wu, Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and others rallied against Trump on the East Coast, Washington [Gov. Bob Ferguson](#) and [Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell](#) presented another united Democratic front on the West Coast.

“A letter like this cannot be normalized,” Ferguson said at a news conference. “Let me be very clear: Washington state will not be bullied or intimidated by threats and legally baseless accusations.”

The flurry of correspondence sent last week by Bondi represents the latest salvo in Trump's war on "sanctuary" jurisdictions; it's also opened new fronts of conflicts over the president's deportation agenda.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom, [a potential contender](#) for president in 2028, responded via his legal affairs secretary by issuing a deadline of his own to Bondi.

"By Tuesday, August 26, 2025, please submit a response to this letter that confirms that you have issued internal guidance clarifying that prosecuting or threatening prosecutions against state and local officials for complying with California law, or similar local policies, is improper because controlling law forecloses any legal basis for such prosecutions," David Sapp wrote.

Representatives of [Hoboken, New Jersey](#), and [Rochester, New York](#), both noted that Bondi could be violating a legal ethics code by corresponding with officials about a subject she's suing them over, especially as she dangles the possibility of criminal charges.

"It appears to be highly inappropriate, let's put it that way," Mayor Ravi Bhalla of Hoboken, [one of four New Jersey cities](#) sued by Trump, told POLITICO. Bhalla said he is asking New Jersey and Florida legal officials to review whether Bondi's conduct was unethical.

A Justice Department spokesperson responded Wednesday: "Since every letter was addressed to the legal representative of the official responsible for these dangerous sanctuary policies, there is no basis for any complaint. The Department is entitled—and indeed obligated — to put officials on notice when they fail to uphold the law and our Constitution."

Los Angeles, Chicago [and New York City](#) are among the other jurisdictions that have been mired in lawsuits with the Trump administration as it seeks to void local policies that restrict how they interact with ICE.

Meanwhile, the renewed focus on “sanctuary” jurisdictions recalled the errors the Justice Department had made when initially building the list.

A spokesperson for Colorado stressed that the state is not a “sanctuary” and mistakenly remains on the updated list, which [was posted with amendments](#) in early August after [being taken down in June](#) amid complaints that it included [sites without policies](#) that restrict cooperation with federal authorities. Nevada, led by Republican Gov. Joe Lombardo, also remains on the updated list despite having no “sanctuary” designation.

Some Democrats are reveling in a new opportunity to confront the Trump administration.

Boston’s Wu is running for reelection this year.

Her campaign is capitalizing on the fight with the president, declaring in a fundraising email after her news conference turned rally: “Donald Trump and Pam Bondi are trying to strong-arm Boston into cooperating with their cruel, dangerous mass deportation policies.”

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul — who with Walz and Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker was called before a Republican-led House panel [in June to testify](#) about their state’s immigration policies — used her response letter to recall Bondi’s time as a statewide official.

“I recognize that you disagree with New York’s view of what the constitution requires of states, and the legality of New York State law and policy, and now — contrary to the

positions you took as Florida Attorney General — believe states are merely vassals of the federal government,” wrote Hochul, who faces a reelection fight next year. “These disputes are rightly before the courts for resolution.”

The courts have repeatedly upheld the rights of states to take a pass on helping federal immigration officials unless they have a warrant looking for known criminals.

A federal judge last month threw out the Trump administration’s bid to force Illinois and Chicago to aid its mass deportation efforts, saying it would encroach on autonomy guaranteed to states under the Constitution.

Chicago Alderman Andre Vasquez, who chairs the City Council Committee on Immigrant and Refugee Rights, said the Trump administration is continuing to overreach.

“Even if the court says that they can’t do something,” Vasquez told POLITICO, “it doesn’t mean they’ll follow what the court says.”