

Ramsey County / Jail again will accept immigration detainees; Feds pay high rate to use excess capacity

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Byline: TIM NELSON, Pioneer Press

Body

Immigration detainees will be going back into the **Ramsey County jail, county** officials said Wednesday, reversing a policy that would have barred some illegal immigrants from the **county's** custody.

"We have informed **immigration** authorities that we **will accept** any of their **detainees**," Sheriff Bob Fletcher said, after a meeting Tuesday of the **Ramsey County** Board.

The commissioners didn't take a formal vote, but their statements at the meeting indicated that there would not be support for rejecting **detainees** brought in by **Immigration** and Customs Enforcement agents from outside the Twin Cities.

Fletcher estimated about half of the **detainees** in his **jail**, as **high** as 40 people in recent months, came from outside the metro area. **Federal** officials **pay** about \$80 a day to house them in St. Paul, a significant premium above what other agencies **pay** to **use** what is, at least for now, **excess capacity** at the **county's jail** near interstates 94 and 35E.

The reversal disappointed **Ramsey County** Commissioner Rafael Ortega, who represents downtown St. Paul, Highland Park and part of the East Side, as well as the traditionally Hispanic community on the West Side.

"I think my colleagues were being influenced by a lot of e-mail, from all over the country, suggesting that we were breaking the law or being somehow un-American," Ortega said of the **county's** earlier decision to temporarily bar suspected illegal immigrants from the **county jail**.

"That just isn't the case," Ortega said.

But other commissioners said they felt they didn't have the legal authority to dictate who could and could not be **jailed** in **Ramsey County**.

"We can't be picking and choosing who we'll take when a law enforcement agency comes to our door with someone," said Commissioner Jim McDonough, who represents most of St. Paul's East Side, which also has a significant Hispanic population.

The controversy was sparked by a December **immigration** raid in Worthington, Minn., one of a series of **immigration** actions across the country. More than 200 employees of the Swift & Co. meatpacking plant in southwestern Minnesota were taken into custody, sparking outrage among critics of U.S. **immigration** policy and those concerned about the families of the detained workers.

Ortega had called closing the **jail** door to **immigration**-related **detainees** a "moral issue" in December.

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It is also, however, a financial issue. Immigration and Customs Enforcement authorities paid about \$2 million last year to house detainees in the Ramsey County jail, in part because the federal government doesn't have its own facilities in Minnesota. The federal payments are the equivalent of about 11 percent of the jail's operating budget.

County commissioners likely would have had to come up with the money some other way, either by raising taxes or cutting other programs, as an effect of the new policy, and Tuesday's meeting indicated they were unlikely to do that.

Tim Nelson can be reached at tnelson@pioneerpress.com or 651-292-1159.

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