

GROWING HISPANIC POPULATION PRESENTS CHALLENGE FOR SMALL-TOWN FORCE;

JOBS AT HOG-PROCESSING PLANT DRAWS IMMIGRANTS TO BEARDSTOWN, ILL.

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Body

After years of handling domestic disputes and complaints about loud music, Police Chief Steve Patterson is learning to deal with forged identification, illegal **immigrants** and a language barrier.

Patterson runs the police **force** in **Beardstown**, a town 40 miles west of Springfield that has seen hundreds - perhaps thousands - of Spanish-speaking workers move in over the past few years.

"Mostly they come here to do their **jobs** and just want to be left alone," Patterson said.

Officially, the city's **population** is 5,700, according to the U.S. census. City officials believe the number is closer to 7,000, thanks to a steady influx of **Hispanic immigrants** in the past five years.

Much of the immigration involves people looking for **jobs** at the Excel Corp. **hog-processing plant**. Patterson said there is a view in the community that immigration has helped ensure the future of Excel, the city's largest employer.

No one knows how many **Hispanic** residents are in **Beardstown** illegally. But Patterson recalled an incident this year in which 22 illegal **immigrants** were picked up in a traffic stop.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service seldom has the manpower available to pick up illegal **immigrants** in rural communities such as **Beardstown**. Eventually, police had to release the group, Patterson said.

City officials cracked down on illegal rooming houses and apartments last summer after authorities found a single-family house with 22 residents.

But most calls are typical of police work in a small community: domestic disturbances, loud music and drug arrests.

Some members of the 13-officer **force** are learning Spanish, though it is not mandatory.

There have been stressful moments.

Local residents still recall the fatal shooting in the summer of 1996 of 22-year-old Terry Brewer at a tavern. Police said Brewer and the chief suspect, an **immigrant** who apparently has fled back to Mexico, had quarreled before.

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The night after the slaying, a cross was burned in front of the tavern. A few days later it was gutted in a suspicious fire. Some KKK literature also was distributed around the community.

The 1996 incidents helped draw the attention of the U.S. attorney's office for central Illinois.

A series of training programs and seminars were offered to help familiarize local law-enforcement with basic immigration law, how to spot fake IDs and illegal documents, handling arrests of illegal aliens and even housing issues.

Program coordinator Terry Lucas said law enforcement is only one element of the program.

He said the primary goal is to help bridge the cultural differences between the Hispanic community and local law enforcement. He noted that something as simple as a traffic stop often can be misunderstood as harassment.

At Su Casa restaurant, informational cards are distributed that explain what to do if stopped by police. The card advises in both Spanish and English, "I am Hispanic. I do not speak-understand English."

Ramon Escapa, a native of Puerto Rico, became the lone Hispanic on the police force when he joined the Beardstown department as a part-time patrol officer last summer. He also is a junior at Western Illinois University at Macomb.

The 21-year-old Escapa, who completed law-enforcement-training classes to qualify for the Beardstown job, remains on call as a translator for other officers. He also is a regular visitor at local schools and civic organizations.

Escapa said he also has tried to make immigrants more comfortable with the police department.

"A lot of times, it's really difficult to get them to speak up at all. I get to hear their side of the story. For so long, it wasn't heard," he said.

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