

Immigration duty a burden, police say

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Body

Two children were dead, run over by a car that kept going.

Witnesses gave confusing testimony. But many saw a passing white van with ladders on top.

The passengers could provide crucial evidence.

One problem: authorities suspected they were Hispanic workers, in the United States illegally.

Even if you're in this country illegally, Hillsborough sheriff's Maj. Greg Brown pleaded at a press conference, come forward and help us.

The scramble to find the white van highlights a growing challenge for local law enforcement:

Penetrating immigrant communities - and their fear of **police** - to help solve crimes.

But since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, there's growing pressure for local law enforcement to do the work of **immigration** officers.

A bill pending in Congress, called the CLEAR Act, would call upon local **police** agencies to detain people with civil as well as criminal **immigration** violations. Agencies that don't sign up would face cuts in federal funds.

Some local **police**, though, **say** the move would destroy all the bridges they've built with minority communities while **burdening** them with an area of law considered more complex than the tax code. Not only would immigrants stop talking to them, they **say**, but it could lead to mistakes and a major backlog of crime calls.

"It doesn't take very long for that open door of communication to be slammed shut," **said** Clearwater **police** Chief Sid Klein. "Then we in local law enforcement (pay the price)."

Trust from victims

Officers around Tampa Bay tell similar stories.

Shots are fired. Stabbings occur. But nobody knows anything.

That has often been the reaction in communities with heavy immigrant populations working in the area's hotel or agriculture industry. Immigrants fear **police**, expecting rampant corruption they find back home or the prospect of deportation or detention.

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"It's a constant battle," said Lt. Rod Reder, spokesman for the Hillsborough Sheriff's Office, which has two deputies working full time to reach out to immigrants and refugees.

"We obviously need them to trust us," he said. "Our main focus is on the crime itself. We're not immigration experts."

In the growing number of cases in human trafficking - an issue that drew a visit on Friday from President Bush - the examples are more hideous: women brought to this country to work as sex slaves; workers brought for slave labor. Victims rarely call police.

In response, U.S. attorneys offices have been seeking help from social service agencies. And long before these efforts, local law enforcement stepped up community policing in immigrant communities.

Clearwater police responded as families moved there in droves from Hidalgo, Mexico, in the 1990s. Chief Klein joined with the YWCA of Tampa Bay to open a Hispanic Outreach Program center near the Police Department's headquarters in downtown Clearwater.

The center's bilingual program provides Spanish-speaking interpreters with police training who are on call at all times. Last year they turned to the community and got leads after the killing of a Mexican woman and her 2-year-old baby, though the crime remains unsolved.

But now police fear their efforts will be wasted if the CLEAR Act passes.

"(Immigrants) are not going to come to police and report anything," said Tampa police Officer Brenda Canino-Fumero, the agency's Hispanic liaison.

Immigration agents

Those who support increased efforts to involve local law enforcement in immigration say federal officials need all the help they can get. Terrorism threats are up. Waves of immigrants pour into neighborhoods.

"It would automatically reduce crime and illegal immigration by allowing local law enforcement to detain criminal and illegal aliens during the course of their duties," said Christy Stefadouros, communications director with U.S. Rep. Mike Bilirakis, R-Tarpon Springs. Bilirakis was one of 121 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives supporting the CLEAR Act when it was filed last year.

The legislation would surpass what Florida already has in place.

Only one of two states to do so - Alabama is the other - Florida signed an agreement with the federal government for immigration work.

For about a year, through the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, seven task forces have been operating around the state, made up of a handful of local officers and deputies. After weeks of training, they become sworn immigration agents and work on domestic security and immigration enforcement.

The CLEAR Act goes further. It would give all local law enforcement the right to detain people solely for immigration violations. States, cities and counties that agree to do so could tap into \$2.5-billion for training, database resources and incarceration, according to legislative supporters.

But some police are worried that immigration laws are so complex the training provided under the bill would not be thorough enough. It would consist largely of a manual developed by the Attorney General or the Department of Homeland Security. Training is not a prerequisite to enforce immigration laws under the bill.

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Those agencies that don't agree to enforce immigration laws - or fail to turn over information to the federal government on all illegal immigrants they apprehend - risk losing federal money they get now for incarcerating illegal criminal immigrants.

For Florida, that meant \$162-million between 1997 and 2003, according to the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

But drastic action is needed, supporters say.

About 80,000 illegal immigrants nationwide are on the streets after serving time for criminal offenses, instead of being deported, said Duke Hipp, press secretary for U.S. Rep. Charlie Norwood, R-Ga., the bill's author.

The problem now, complains Hipp, is that state prisons and local jails release criminal illegal immigrants after they serve their time. They often refuse to hold them on immigration or visa violations until federal officials can pick them up.

"It's a revolving door and it's not getting any better," Hipp said.

Division over issue

Involving local police won't solve that problem, says Clearwater Chief Klein.

When immigration authorities asked for his agency's assistance with "sweeps" back in the 1990s, he complied, only to find out that the majority of the illegal immigrants caught in the roundup were released again. They were never deported.

Since then, he stopped taking part in the sweeps and started outreach efforts.

Immigration authorities should do more at the border or hire more officers to prevent illegal immigration in the first place rather than tie up local police on issues that aren't related to crime, he said.

"For the most part in our community, we're finding (immigrants) are not a law enforcement problem," Klein said.

National sheriff's and police agencies have declared support and opposition.

The June newsletter of the Washington-based Police Executive Research Forum took up the issue. PERF members fell on both sides, the newsletter declared.

Hillsborough Sheriff Cal Henderson said he might enforce the measure, depending on the final form of the law, if it helped with national security.

But as a former U.S. Border Patrol officer, he appreciated the complexity of the job, despite training. "Our people would have a hard time enforcing it," he said.

Complex classifications

Immigration attorneys are cringing at the very idea.

They say immigration law is more complicated than tax law.

After years of experience, even they have difficulty sorting through the morass.

"It could be even a technical violation, but local cops won't have the ability to know what they are and sometimes it would look like a violation when it's not," said Judy Golub, senior director of advocacy for the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

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She predicted that legal residents risk getting ensnared in the confusion.

"There are so many different types of visa statuses and classifications," added Marshall Fitz, associate director of advocacy for the association.

"There are so many intermediate steps to reaching one of those classifications," he **said**. "And the accuracy of the **immigration** data they do have is so notoriously flawed, it would be 50-50 whether any information you're pulling off is timely or if errors have been corrected."

All that **immigration** information would be poured into the National Crime Information Center database, or NCIC - what **police** and deputies use now to track suspected criminals.

Local law enforcement officers fear clogging that system with the addition of thousands of names of **immigration** violators.

But Hipp from Rep. Norwood's office **said** something needs to be done. There are simply too many illegal immigrants outnumbering federal officials.

"It's like a needle in the haystack," Hipp **said**.

However, too many of those "needles" end up being hardworking farm workers, not terrorists, **said** Margarita Romo, director of Farmworkers Self-Help Inc. in Dade City.

"I know we all want to be concerned about safety," Romo **said**. "But I think they are taking some of this stuff too far."

As for the hit-and-run accident, Hillsborough officials charged schoolteacher Jennifer Porter with leaving the deadly wreck in her Toyota Echo based on evidence and her admission. Her lawyer still wants to know what role was played by the white van.

Its passengers, according to court documents, apparently never came forward.

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Tampa **police** Officer Brenda Canino-Fumero jokes with members of a Spanish-speaking household who want her to take a puppy. She **says** a proposed federal law would hurt her agency's ties with the community. "(Immigrants) are not going to come to **police** and report anything," **says** the Tampa **police** Hispanic liaison.

Graphic

PHOTO, JOHN PENDYGRAFT; Tampa **police** Officer Brenda Canino-Fumero jokes with members of a Spanish-speaking household who want her to take a puppy.

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