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Monmouth County's undocumented immigrant program on hold

Intended to identify those involved in crime

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FREEHOLD BUREAU

Monmouth County's participation in a controversial program intended to identify illegal immigrants involved in crime has remained on hold since Sheriff Kim Guadagno, who oversees the county jail, first sought the power last year to check immigration status during routine jail bookings.

Federal Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano ordered a review of the 287(g) program — which is used by 67 state and local agencies, but none in New Jersey — shortly after she took office in January, department spokesman Matt Chandler said on Tuesday.

"It's a wide-ranging, broad review of that program that's taking place, and there's also a natural administration transition process," said Chandler, who declined to say if delays were a sign that Guadagno's request will be turned down.

But a 287(g) critic, Charles "Shai" Goldstein, executive director of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, said the lag is small comfort and that he sent a letter to Napolitano earlier this week asking for her to "personally review" Monmouth County's application.

Goldstein said a number of recently published studies, including one from the Government Accountability Office, criticize the program on various levels.

"As policy activists, we can't simply wait or hope the program goes away, because it creates divisions in communities and leads to suspicions of immigrant neighbors," Goldstein said.

The program is administered by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a component of Homeland Security.

Chandler said ICE officials "cannot discuss or share predecisional information."

Cynthia Scott, a spokeswoman for Guadagno, said, "We haven't heard which way it's going, but we were told when we applied it could take a while."

Guadagno had said she intends to have a handful of officers check immigration status at the jail. The approximately \$50,000 in training costs would be recouped if the new program identifies undocumented prisoners, a classification that would bring in \$105 per day in federal reimbursements, she said.

Goldstein said Guadagno should withdraw the application.

"Many law enforcement experts recognize that such agreements impair the ability to investigate crimes within communities. When you focus on issues of 'status' and not evidence of actual crimes, this threatens public safety," he said.

Chandler said the Homeland Security review of 287(g) includes "addressing any previous civil rights abuse and reworking the template for any future memorandum of agreements."

Chandler added, "The Government Accountability Office did note many program benefits and safety benefits as well."

The Government Accountability Office report was requested by congressional oversight panels in advance of hearings held last month by the House Committee on Homeland Security.