

Police, officials try to calm immigrants' concerns

Courier Post - Cherry Hill, N.J.

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Date: Dec 20, 2007

Start Page: n/a

Section: South Jersey News

Text Word Count: 546

Representatives from more than 50 civic and community groups gathered at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception here Wednesday to discuss a state directive that allows law enforcement officials to ask about the immigration status of people arrested for certain crimes.

The purpose of the community forum, sponsored by the Camden County Prosecutor's Office and the Camden Police Department, was to explain how police are enforcing the state Attorney General's directive.

"It puts upon local law enforcement the obligation to inquire about immigration status after an arrest," acting Camden County Prosecutor Joshua Ottenberg said. "That information will eventually go to immigration authorities. It's not an investigative question, it's a booking question that's supposed to happen only after an arrest."

Under the directive, police officers are only allowed to ask about the immigration status of people arrested for indictable offenses or for driving under the influence.

When there is reason to believe that person may be an undocumented immigrant, police will notify Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The directive does not apply to victims, witnesses or potential witnesses of a crime or anyone requesting police assistance.

"The primary job of law enforcement is to solve crimes, not to be in the immigration business," Ottenberg said.

Since the directive was issued In August, Camden County Jail officials have reported an average of about 12 illegal immigrants a day to federal immigration authorities, Ottenberg said.

The policy shift was spurred by the arrest of 28-year-old Jose Carranza in connection with the execution-style killings this summer of three college students in Newark. Carranza is an illegal immigrant who was free on bail on child rape charges at the time the slayings occurred.

Critics of the directive said that despite a clause prohibiting police from asking victims about their immigration status, immigrants are afraid to report crimes for fear of deportation.

"Our No. 1 objection is it has a chilling effect, whether it's intended or not," said Shai Goldstein, of the Newark-based New Jersey Immigration Policy Network.

Camden activist Angel Cordero said undocumented immigrants are often the target of burglary. Their lack of documentation means they are not able to open bank accounts and are forced to keep their earnings at home. Since the directive was issued, members of the already-reluctant group are even more fearful to report crimes committed against them, Cordero said.

"These immigrants are like sitting ducks," Cordero said. "This directive from the attorney general is not helping."

Ottenberg said victims and witnesses are eligible for a special visa and law enforcement officials can help them apply for it.

"We're going to try to utilize that more in the future," Ottenberg said. "If people are afraid to talk to us, it's going to be difficult for us to do our jobs in the future."

"We do not want to double-victimize people," Camden Police Executive Arturo Venegas Jr. added. "We want them to come forward."

Karina Calva, of the Mexican Consulate in Philadelphia, said the Mexican government issues picture identification cards so Mexican citizens here can open bank accounts.

"It's different than having a passport," Calva said. "A lot of police stations and policemen accept this as an ID."

Consulates and embassies for many other countries issue similar identification cards.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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