

## **Immigration training for jails draws praise**

The program sought by Harris County sheriff is called successful in other states  
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**BY JAMES PINKERTON**

The federal immigration training program Harris County Sheriff Tommy Thomas wants for a dozen jailers has been successful in identifying illegal immigrants in Arizona and Oklahoma, officials there said.

Harris County would be the first law enforcement agency in Texas to receive training from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, joining 34 departments from Florida to California that have undergone the training. Thomas announced Friday that he authorized his department to pursue the program.

The training would give employees the ability to interview inmates more thoroughly about their immigration status and authorize them to detain those in the country illegally.

Seventy departments are on a training waiting list, including four in Texas, but an ICE official would not identify them until formal agreements are signed.

In Phoenix, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio said ICE trained 100 deputies and 60 jailers at his county facilities. The officers are not only checking immigration status of jail inmates, but assisting in ICE criminal investigations, the sheriff said.

"Since the cops won't ask where they're from, we ask," said Arpaio, referring to local police who don't check the immigration status of those they arrest. "We check everybody who comes in, about 300 or 400 a day, and we have determined over 8,000 illegals have been booked into our jail. It's been successful."

### **Results in Oklahoma**

In Oklahoma, Capt. Tom Hucceby of the Tulsa County Sheriff's Department said 30 jail detention officers trained by ICE have filed 1,200 immigration detainers since last September. A detainer allows law enforcement to keep immigrants detained until they are turned over to ICE.

"It's definitely making a difference," Hucceby said.

The program's potential impact locally appears strong.

In September 2006, Harris County jailers began to ask all non-citizens booked into the jail if they were in the country legally, and about 5,500 a year admit they are undocumented, Maj. Don McWilliams said. ICE agents maintain a presence in the jail

booking office, but McWilliams said it's not sufficient to identify all the undocumented immigrants.

"ICE, like everyone else, has limited resources, and on a typical day they're there 16 hours. They're spread pretty thin, and they don't have staff to provide a 24/7 presence" in the jail, McWilliams said.

He suspects that those who admit being here illegally are "the tip of a very big iceberg."

Meanwhile, as the department proceeds with the training, questions of political motivations are being raised.

Sheriff officials say Thomas' coming campaign for re-election in November has nothing to do with the policy change, describing it as tightening of a practice dating to 2000 that allows federal immigration agents to check jail bookings of detainees.

"When you make a change in a political year, people assign the basest motivation to that change and frankly, it's preposterous and insulting," McWilliams said. "We make changes all the time, changes in practices and policies, and nobody notices for three years out of four."

But there are some who believe the sheriff's decision has everything to do with politics, not policy.

"This is obviously being done for political gain," said Michael Olivas, a University of Houston law professor. "Anything done between now and the election is inherently suspect, and it's a bad idea."

McWilliams said the county will learn Friday if ICE has approved its training request. Officials have asked that the training be held locally to avoid travel costs.

### **No charge to local agency**

The 287 (g) program, which refers to the section of a 1996 immigration law that created it, is offered by ICE at no charge to local law enforcement. Travel and lodging expenses are not provided.

The sheriff's policy is in stark contrast to that of the Houston Police Department. Chief Harold Hurtt on Thursday took a strong public stance against pursuing the ICE training, saying that taking on federal immigration duties would overextend his officers and increase police response time to emergencies.

McWilliams said the sheriff's announcement Friday about the ICE training was in response to a Houston Chronicle story Thursday detailing Hurtt's position, which also quoted a senior sheriff's official who said policing of immigration laws in the community had the potential to "cripple" the department.

"We want to make sure the community knows the sheriff's department is not coming late to this ballgame," McWilliams said. "We've been working for at least eight years proactively with ICE to identify illegal aliens in our prisoner population."