

Senate race centers on illegal-immigration issue

Dole, Hagan disagree on program in which local police check immigration status of people in custody

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Illegal immigration is emerging as a top issue in this year's U.S. Senate race in North Carolina.

Sen. Elizabeth Dole, the Republican incumbent, and Kay Hagan, the Democratic challenger, both made public appearances this week alongside county sheriffs in which they talked about how local law-enforcement officials can cooperate with federal immigration authorities.

But the candidates disagree on the effectiveness and the financial cost of a program that allows local officials to screen criminal suspects for immigration status.

Dole is a big supporter of the program, which is nicknamed the "287(g) program" after the section of federal immigration law that established it.

In North Carolina, four sheriff's offices in four counties — Alamance, Cabarrus, Gaston and Mecklenburg — currently use the program at their county jails, and three other counties — Cumberland, Henderson and Wake — are training to use the program. The Durham city police department also has the program, which allows jailers to check the immigration status of people who have been arrested for other crimes.

If they are found to be in the country illegally, local officials notify federal authorities, who initiate deportation proceedings.

Speaking yesterday at the Alamance County Jail, Dole said that the 287(g) program has been a big success. She said that it is an important part of her effort to establish what she called a statewide plan for immigration enforcement. "It's not a matter of going out and picking people up on the street," she said. "These are people who are illegal aliens who have self-identified themselves because of their criminal behavior. That's the purpose of this plan: to identify, to apprehend and to deport illegal and criminal aliens."

According to Dole's Senate office, the average number of such deportations in North Carolina six years ago was 26 a month. The number of such deportations is now more than 500 per month.

Dole also released her first television ad of the campaign this week. The ad focuses on immigration.

Hagan, a state senator from Greensboro who will face Dole in the November general election, expressed some support for the 287(g) program, but she called it a "patchwork" measure that falls short of a comprehensive immigration solution that would secure the nation's borders and crack down on employers who hire illegal immigrants.

Hagan also said that the federal government has failed to provide enough money to pay for the program. Appearing earlier this week in Raleigh, Hagan told a group of sheriffs that the cost of enforcing immigration laws should not fall on state or local governments.

As a key budget writer in the N.C. Senate, Hagan helped appropriate \$750,000 in this year's state budget to help counties set up the 287(g) program.

"Washington wasn't providing it," said Dave Hoffman, a spokesman for Hagan. "This is another issue where Washington is broken."

Dole directly disputed Hagan's charge. She said that the federal government pays the full cost of the program.

The federal government does pay for the training required for local law-enforcement agents. It also pays for necessary computer hardware that local officials use to tap into federal immigration databases.

But if a county incurs some other cost in setting up the program, it must find some other way to pay for it. For instance, Forsyth County applied for the program but estimated that it would need to hire additional staff.

Forsyth County Sheriff Bill Schatzman, a Republican, was in Graham yesterday supporting Dole's immigration platform. But Schatzman said that if Forsyth County were to enact the 287(g) program, the county — not the federal government — would have to pay for the extra staff.

Forsyth County is unlikely to be enrolled in the program anytime soon because the federal government has slowed expansion of the program.

Brian Nick, Dole's chief of staff, said that the program is not intended to require any additional staff, just retraining of existing staff.

He also said that the 287(g) program is intended to be used only in counties with enough jail space to detain the illegal immigrants. Forsyth County, which has a crowded jail, is not considered one of those counties.

Counties without the 287(g) program can still check the immigration status of inmates through other programs that give counties electronic access to immigration databases. Nick said that these programs are being expanded and enhanced throughout North Carolina, an effort that Schatzman praised.