

Vt. Town Sets Immigrant Farm Worker Policy

By WILSON RING

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MONTPELIER, Vt. -- A small town in Vermont is implementing a policy designed to encourage immigrant farm workers to cooperate with police _ even if they are in the country illegally.

Under the new policy, Middlebury officers will check the immigration status of a person only if they are suspected of committing a crime. Police Chief Thomas Hanley proposed the policy, which was adopted unanimously by the town Select Board last week.

"There's a potential for a subculture to develop where people don't report things here. They are easily subject to predation from others because they know they won't report anything," Hanley said.

"I'm worried about somebody seeing a fire or somebody that needs help not picking up the phone and calling us because they're afraid somebody will find out who they are and deport them," he added.

Middlebury police will assist in any federal immigration operations in the area if needed, the chief said. And they will contact immigration authorities if someone is suspected of committing a crime.

"If they've committed a crime, then let the chips fall where they may," Hanley said.

"Some guy that's working on a farm here that minds his own business, he's of no interest to us."

The move is a response to the growing number of immigrant workers in Vermont. A study conducted two years ago estimated there were about 2,500 immigrant farm workers in the state, many of whom are illegal, said Middlebury College Spanish Professor Gloria Estela Gonzalez-Zenteno, who is a Mexican citizen.

"I think it's really, really good news for this area here, because there is a consensus that the employers, the workers and the farmworkers just needed something like this so they could go about their regular lives without fearing disruption of all kinds," said Gonzalez-Zenteno.

But those who support tougher enforcement of immigration laws say Middlebury's policy is flawed.

A provision in the policy accepts as valid an identification card issued by Mexican consulates, and those IDs are too easy to obtain, said Jessica Vaughan, a senior policy analyst with the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies.

"What if this is a person who committed a murder in Oregon and is now living in Vermont and has gone to the Mexican consulate and gotten the 'matricula consular?'" she said, using the Spanish term for the document.

"They have no way of knowing who they are dealing with, whether the person's an ax murderer or simply milking cows to better his life," she said.

The center, a non-profit think tank, says on its Web site it holds a "pro-immigrant, low-immigration vision which seeks fewer immigrants but a warmer welcome for those admitted."

Amparo Anguiano, deputy consul in Mexico's Boston consulate, said the IDs are being continually improved. To get one, a Mexican must have a local address in the United States and be able to prove it.

Middlebury is probably the first place in Vermont to recognize the ID, she said.

The city of Burlington enacted a similar policy early this year. It doesn't include acceptance of the Mexican consular ID card, said Deputy Chief Michael Schirling.

Vermont Public Safety Commissioner Kerry Sleeper said that most police agencies in the state contact immigration officials only when illegal immigrants are suspected of crimes _ even in the absence of written policies.

"Vermont's is a very reasoned approach," Sleeper said.

Local communities are free to decide how to approach immigration policies, said Paula Grenier, a spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.