

Fingerprint rule shakes Conn. city

February 24, 2012 | By Maria Sacchetti

EAST HAVEN, Conn. - Federal immigration officials activated the controversial crime-fighting program known as Secure Communities across Connecticut this week, stunning this city just weeks after the FBI arrested four police officers on charges of harassing immigrants and Latinos.

The launch marked the second New England state to fully deploy the program since it started in 2008 and signaled to the remaining states, including Massachusetts, that the federal government is plowing ahead with the initiative in spite of resistance. The program automatically checks the fingerprints of everyone arrested by state and local police against immigration databases to ensure that they are in the country legally.

Like Governor Deval Patrick, Governor Dannel Malloy of Connecticut last year sought to delay Secure Communities on concerns that the program - designed primarily to catch and deport criminals - is also deporting high numbers of immigrants who have not been convicted of any crime.

Federal officials activated the program with little public notice, illustrating how quickly the landscape can change.

Few communities were more caught off guard than East Haven, a working city of 29,000 on the Quinnipiac River in southern Connecticut. In December, the Justice Department accused East Haven police of engaging in systemic harassment of Latinos and immigrants. After the four officers were arrested last month, the police chief resigned and the mayor outraged residents by saying he might have “tacos” to reach out to the community.

Jorge Zuñiga, a 36-year old construction worker from Ecuador, said the new program would immediately raise fears of retaliation.

“It’s not fair,” said Zuñiga. “What are the people going to think? They’re going to think that they wanted to do this to us.”

Secure Communities, which allows immigration officials to automatically check the fingerprints that police routinely send to the FBI for criminal checks, is in 45 states nationwide, including Rhode Island.

In Massachusetts, only Boston participates in the program after helping to pilot it in 2006, but officials at US Immigration and Customs Enforcement - known as ICE - say the program will be nationwide by the end of 2013. The program also went statewide in Maryland and New Jersey this week.

Federal officials say the goal is to find and deport serious criminals and flagrant violators of federal immigration law, such as those who return to the country after being deported. ICE spokesman Ross Feinstein said the vast majority of the 169,329 immigrants deported since 2008 fell into those categories.

“Secure Communities has demonstrated its effectiveness in transforming immigration enforcement to a focus on criminal offenders,” he said in a statement.

But in Boston and elsewhere, critics say Secure Communities is ensnaring immigrants stopped for minor traffic violations and never convicted of any crime.

Federal statistics as of Jan. 31 show that only half of the 446 immigrants arrested by Boston police and deported since 2008 had been convicted of a crime, a figure much lower than the national average of about 74 percent.

Advocates for immigrants also highlight another concern, that the program makes domestic violence victims and others afraid to report crime for fear of being deported.

“We are worried,” said Eva Millona, executive director of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition. “I’m most worried that the program has flaws and that the flaws are not being addressed.”

In East Haven, residents from the deputy police chief to Latino store owners were caught off guard by the launch of Secure Communities. Immigrants who had been painting homemade signs in the back of Los Amigos Grocery for a demonstration tomorrow rushed to Hartford to urge the governor to halt the program.

“It’s not within our power to stop it,” said Mike Lawlor, Malloy’s top criminal justice adviser. Lawlor said Connecticut will decide on a case-by-case basis whether to detain an immigrant at ICE’s request.

Others praised the program this week for rooting out dangerous criminals - including more than 45,000 serious offenders such as rapists and murderers - and finding people who do not have legal authorization to live in the United States.

“It’s nothing to do with discrimination,” said Lou Ferraro, 62, in front of a local coffee shop on Main Street. “You should do it anyway.”

Along a weathered stretch of Main Street this week, immigrants and shop owners said they were skeptical. For years, they said, police stationed cruisers outside their businesses, driving away customers. According to a federal indictment of four police officers last month, some officers beat Latinos or falsely arrested them, and harassed customers and store owners alike. The four officers have pleaded not guilty.

The 50-member police force has only one Spanish-speaking officer, though the Latino community has risen from 4 percent to 10 percent since 2000. About 9 percent of the residents are immigrants.

Marcia Chacón, an owner of My Country Store and an immigrant from Ecuador, said her family came to East Haven for the affordable homes and the small-town feel. But as immigrants fled, her business struggled. She lost two rental properties to foreclosures.

“The police are supposed to protect us, but it wasn’t that way. They kept us in terror,” she said.

Herman Zuñiga, a community leader and a carpenter who had been an elementary school teacher in his native Ecuador, said immigrants have helped revitalize this fading city.

“We are taxpayers either way,” said Zuñiga, who has one child in college and another on the way. “We purchase car insurance. We buy groceries. Don’t forget that.”

Deputy Police Chief John Mannion said the department is taking a “very hard look at ourselves” and working to improve relations with the community. Asked about racial profiling, Mannion said, “That’s not going to happen.”

“This is just a computer system that makes it easier for ICE,” he said.

For illegal immigrants such as Carlos, a 32-year-old construction worker from Ecuador who declined to give his last name, the new system raises the likelihood that a police stop could lead to his deportation.

“What can I do?” Carlos said with a shrug as he walked to his girlfriend’s car, got behind the wheel, and drove away.

http://articles.boston.com/2012-02-24/metro/31092280_1_immigration-officials-immigration-enforcement-customs-enforcement