

Police chiefs reaffirm opposition to sanctuary cities legislation

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Steve Taylor

ALTON, June 9 - Police chiefs and county sheriffs along the border have reaffirmed their strong opposition to the 'sanctuary cities' legislation peddled by Gov. Rick Perry.

In a letter sent to state legislators, the law enforcement leaders say community policing could be irreparably harmed if the legislation is passed.

The letter was first sent during the regular legislative session. It is now being sent again following Perry's announcement that 'sanctuary cities' legislation was being added to the call for the current special session.

Here is the letter:

First, immigration is a federal policy issue and demands a national solution. Any attempts at the local or state level are only piecemeal approaches that will fail to provide comprehensive solutions. We cannot be misled by extreme rhetoric. Our Texas is greater. Our values are about embracing innovation and diversity, and recognizing the contributions of every sector of our society.

Second, Texas' security depends on community involvement and partnerships which are the cornerstone of our community policing plans. We believe that local law enforcement should be focused on criminal activities, not on enforcing civil violations of federal law. Mandating local police to enforce the federal immigration code alienates a significant and growing sector of our society, especially in the Latino community. In order to achieve national security and border security, we must incorporate Texas' immigrant communities as part of the solution. Alienating any sector of our community from law enforcement is not good for Texas and is not good for our security.

Third, our departments have worked hard at building partnerships across various sectors of our society. We are concerned that some legislation now being considered will lead to racial profiling and create distrust between law enforcement and ethnic communities. That hard won trust we currently have would be negatively affected, ultimately jeopardizing public safety.

Fourth, Texas law enforcement is already feeling the negative impacts of the economic downturn. Any state laws that put us on the path of enforcing federal immigration laws will create an additional unfunded mandate on law enforcement departments, as well as be a tax burden for our municipalities and counties during budget deficit years.

Fifth, we know that the vast majority of the people ultimately affected by proposed anti-immigrant legislation are productive members of Texas communities and are deeply rooted in our neighborhoods. As executives of our departments, we do the work of serving and protecting the public while complying with our Constitution. This is best done when allies across all sectors of society continue to be active partners and help us to provide the public with the level of safety they expect from their government.

Statement signed by:

El Paso County Sheriff Richard Wiles
San Antonio Police Chief William McManus
Dallas County Sheriff Lupe Valdez
McAllen Police Chief Victor Rodriguez
United ISD Police Department Chief Ray Garner

Brownsville
Police
Chief
Carlos
Garcia
says his
officers are
busy
enough
with their
own work.
He does
not want
them to
have to do
the work
of Border
Patrol also.

San Juan Chief of Police Juan Gonzalez
Hidalgo County Sheriff Lupe Trevino
Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo
Cameron County Sheriff Omar Lucio
Bexar County Sheriff Amadeo Ortiz
Brownsville Police Chief Carlos Garcia

Under the sanctuary cities legislation, a city would not be able to tell its police department not to ask the immigration status of a resident it questions. Likewise, a county would not be able to tell its sheriff's department not to ask the immigration status of a resident it questions.

Gov. Perry made 'sanctuary cities' legislation a legislative "emergency" at the start of the 82nd legislative session in January. The legislation was passed on a largely party line vote in the Texas House but did not make progress in the Texas Senate. So, Perry has added the item to the call for the current special session.

Perry has not said local law enforcement should specifically ask immigration status questions. However, he wants to give them the option and wants the block that cities and counties place on such questions to be lifted. Attorneys who specialize in helping immigrants say they are going to be overloaded with work suing police and sheriff's departments who ask the immigrant status of residents, citing the 14th amendment equal protection clause in the U.S. Constitution.

The leaders of community groups who assist colonia residents say they are dismayed by Perry's decision to add 'sanctuary cities' legislation to the call for the special session. However, they say it is not just colonia residents that need to be fearful of the legislation.

"I don't think this is just an issue for people living in the colonias. This is going to impact every Latino, every Hispanic. Any one of us could be profiled under this legislation," said Martha Sanchez, community organizer for La Unión del Pueblo Entero in Hidalgo County.

Sanchez said she wished Perry and the legislature would listen to the police chiefs and sheriffs who say the 'sanctuary cities' legislation is unnecessary.

"We have met with the police chiefs in the Valley on this issue and they don't want it. They have their hands full doing their own work, without having to do the work of Border Patrol as well. The police need the eyes and ears of the community helping them to keep our communities safe. That will be eroded if this legislation passes," Sanchez said.

Sanchez added that Perry has "no feelings for the Hispanic community and we will remember this at the next election."

Perry, naturally enough, sees things differently.

"Texas owes it to the brave law enforcement officials, who put their lives on the line every day to protect our families and communities, to give them the discretion they need to adequately do their jobs," Perry said, in his announcement that 'sanctuary cities' legislation had been added to the call for the special session.

"Abolishing sanctuary cities in Texas, using the federal Secure Communities program and ensuring that only individuals who are here legally can obtain a valid Texas driver's license sends a clear message that Texas will not turn a blind eye to those breaking our laws."

In addition to 'sanctuary cities,' Perry also asked state lawmakers to make sure the Secure Communities program is being used by law enforcement agencies. Some states are pulling out of this federal program, claiming it undermines community policing. Perry also asked lawmakers to look at the issuing of driver's licenses and personal identification certificates.

These items are covered in SB 9, authored at the start of the special session by state Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands. State Rep. Burt Solomons, R-Carrollton, is carrying similar legislation in the House.

State Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, is disappointed Perry added 'sanctuary cities' legislation to the call for the special session. He said the passing of such legislation would take Texas a "step closer" to Arizona.

"We need to focus on good public policy like the version of Secure Communities the Senate approved during regular session. Secure Communities focuses on criminals - undocumented individuals who commit crimes. Sanctuary Cities is a proposal that discriminates against the Latino community here in Texas - the majority of which is in this country legally," Hinojosa said.

"The fact is that not even our law enforcement organizations support the proposed Sanctuary Cities legislation. They understand it will draw on their already scarce resources and manpower. They also understand that Sanctuary Cities will make it less likely that undocumented individuals will cooperate with the police - this can jeopardize our security.

"We shouldn't be harassing law-abiding Hispanics just because they look Mexican. More to the point, Sanctuary Cities is a made-up issue - it's a solution looking for a problem."