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## **Immigration Policy at Issue in Democratic Primary for Sheriff in Travis County**

By **JULIÁN AGUILAR**

In Travis County, which many consider the liberal hub of Texas, a controversial [immigration-enforcement](#) policy is at the forefront of the sheriff's race.

Sheriff Greg Hamilton, first elected in 2004, is coming under increasing fire from his Democratic primary challenger, John Sisson, a retired Austin Police Department lieutenant, for his use of [Secure Communities](#). The program, administered by [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) and in place statewide, compares the fingerprints of arrested individuals to a federal database to determine whether those individuals are eligible for deportation. If a person is found to be in violation, ICE requests that a detainer be placed on the individual for 48 hours, excluding weekends and holidays.

The federal government says the program is needed to ferret out violent immigrants or repeat immigration violators for deportation. But critics say that the system focuses on lower-level offenders rather than the more violent criminals. Mr. Sisson said Sheriff Hamilton grants detainers on every immigrant who is booked.

“I was appalled to see what it was doing to the Hispanic community and the immigrant community here,” Mr. Sisson said. “I felt like it was very inhumane to be lazy and not do the research and say, ‘We’ll just hold everybody for deportation and not even mess with the particulars.’ ”

Sheriff Hamilton said that he is merely following the law.

“The only one that can deport and put an immigration detainer on an individual is an ICE agent, not us,” he said. “At the Travis County Jail, we follow the law, and the law says that when an ICE detainer is put on, the law enforcement agency shall maintain that individual for 48 hours.”

From June 2009 to September 2011, Travis County submitted 80,731 fingerprint sets and removed 2,269 immigrants, including those who left voluntarily.

More than 900 were Level 3 offenders, convicted of misdemeanors that include traffic violations and drunken driving. There were 420 Level 1 offenders and 437 Level 2. Level 1 are aggravated felonies, including murder, rape, sexual abuse of a minor and drug trafficking. Level 2 offenders are convicted of any lesser felony or three misdemeanors.

Travis County's number of removals surpasses that of Bexar County, where about 105,600 submissions were processed, resulting in the removal of 1,479 immigrants. Bexar County, which includes San Antonio, has a population of about 1,715,000, compared with Travis County's population of 1,024,000.

But Sheriff Hamilton said deputies release immigrants if ICE agents do not take them and they are otherwise releasable on bond.

“Secure Communities identifies the individuals that are in our community that have run afoul of law enforcement,” he said. “And I think it's very important that somebody knows who is in the community.”

But Sheriff Hamilton also cited his sensitivity toward the immigrant community, legal or otherwise, most of whom he said are in search of a better life. His wife is a naturalized citizen from Honduras, he said, and his department delivers aid to Austin's Casa Marianella immigrant shelter.

“I have never asked a question, are they here legally or illegally,” he said. “I just want to help out.”

The winner of the May 29 Democratic primary will face Raymond Frank, a former sheriff and admitted underdog Republican candidate who identifies himself as an independent in the mold of Representative Ron Paul, Republican of Lake Jackson.

Mr. Frank has vowed to do away with the program if he is elected because it separates families. “A lot of Republicans are pretty outspoken about immigration,” he said. “And I don't share their views at all.”

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[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/us/immigration-policy-at-issue-in-primary-for-sheriff-in-travis-county-texas.html?\\_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/us/immigration-policy-at-issue-in-primary-for-sheriff-in-travis-county-texas.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y)