

Law enforcement officials call for immigration reform

By KEN BLACK, TIMES-REPUBLICAN

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If there is one thing local law enforcement agencies in both cities and counties don't want, it's the responsibility of enforcing immigration laws.

"Law enforcement needs to stay focused on its mission of preventing and investigating crimes, not checking immigration status," said Polk County Sheriff Bill McCarthy, who was one of several law enforcement administrators to participate in a nationwide conference call Thursday.

Jack McAllister, the acting police chief in Marshalltown, agreed with that as well.

"We don't have the authority to enforce immigration laws," he said. "We've got so much work anyway, just enforcing state and local laws, it would be hard to handle immigration."

The police does do some things when it arrests an individual it discovers has fraudulent documents, including contacting Immigration and Customs Enforcement to see if they want a hold placed on that individual.

Law enforcement officials who participated in the conference call said the problem with immigration and local law enforcement is multi-faceted and promotes a distrust of local authorities and becomes a strain on resources.

Several mentioned that current immigration policy makes community policing, a strategy of the police and public working together to root out various criminal elements, almost impossible.

McCarthy said immigration reform was needed. That point became much clearer to him at the raids in Postville last year.

"What was accomplished by that?" he said.

He noted the population of the town has gone from 3,600 to 2,000 and that churches now feed between 200 and 400 each night.

Further, he said there were cases where children, days after the raid, would go to the church seeking food because no one had fed them.

McAllister said the situation was not nearly as bad in Marshalltown, after the Swift plant was raided in December 2006.

"In most cases, children had friends and relatives who looked after them if that was needed," he said. "We fielded no calls of children being abandoned after the raids."

Though the law enforcement officials participating in the news conference call did not offer many specifics, all said they were in favor of securing the borders and looking at other matters related to immigration.