

Immigration enforcement program to be shut down

By Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – The Obama administration is starting to shut down a program that deputized local police officers to act as immigration agents.

By Toby Talbot, AP

John Morton, director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement for the Department of Homeland Security, speaks Dec. 12 in Williston, Vt. A program that deputized local police officers to act as immigration agents is ending.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials have trained local officers around the country to act as their agencies' immigration officers. Working either in jails or in the field, the officers can check the immigration status of suspects and place immigration holds on them.

The program, known as 287(g), reached its peak under [President George W. Bush](#), when 60 local agencies signed contracts with ICE to implement it. But that trend slowed significantly under [President Obama](#)— only eight agencies have signed up since he took office, and none has done so since August 2010.

Now, in their proposed budget for the upcoming year, [Department of Homeland Security](#) officials say they will not sign new contracts for 287(g) officers working in the field and will terminate the "least productive" of those agreements — saving an estimated \$17 million. All the contracts between ICE and local police agencies run for three years, so that portion of the program could be finished by November when the last contract for field officers expires.

In its budget request, DHS said officials instead will focus on expanding Secure Communities, a program that checks the fingerprints of all people booked into local jails against federal immigration databases. The followup work in those cases is done by ICE agents, not local police.

"The Secure Communities screening process is more consistent, efficient and cost-effective in identifying and removing criminal and other priority aliens," the department explained in its budget request.

The program had been criticized by Homeland Security inspector general reports, which found that local officers were not being properly trained and there was not enough oversight to ensure that local agencies weren't using the program to engage in racial profiling.

A study last year by the [Migration Policy Institute](#), a non-partisan think tank, found that immigrants developed "fear and mistrust of authorities" when they realized that local police could act as immigration agents.

The main complaint Friday from groups that oppose 287(g) was that the program isn't being terminated immediately, and that its replacement — Secure Communities — is not much better.

"The 287(g) program has been repeatedly called into question by advocates as well as the Department of Homeland Security's inspector general, and should be terminated rather than sustained with taxpayer money," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the [National Immigration Forum](#). "The Secure Communities program is surrounded by grave concerns about the impact to public safety, community policing and civil rights abuses."

Defenders of the program, such as Jessica Vaughan of the Center for Immigration Studies, say Homeland Security is "putting politics ahead of public safety" by cutting back the 287(g) program. She said Secure Communities is helpful but that local officers working in the field are better able to identify illegal immigrants who may not have their fingerprints in federal databases, making it harder to identify them.

She said some agencies such as the Colorado Department of Public Safety have used their 287(g) officers to suppress drug and human smuggling, gang activity and identity theft and said many sheriffs and police chiefs prefer the program to Secure Communities.

"The problem for ICE is that while they may feel that they get political brownie points for this kind of gesture, in reality what the anti-enforcement groups want is for them to end 287(g) and Secure Communities, not curtail (them)," said Vaughan, director of policy studies for the center. "So it's futile — they end up making everyone on both sides angry."

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