

Immigration screening launches today in city jails

By SUSAN CARROLL
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Houston Mayor Bill White will officially launch a fingerprint-based immigration screening program in the city's jails today, fulfilling his pledge to have the system up and running by the time he leaves office.

White, the outgoing mayor and Texas gubernatorial candidate, has faced harsh criticism for perceived flip-flopping on the issue of immigration enforcement in the jails. He previously requested to have the city participate in the controversial 287(g) program that would have trained officers to help Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents screen for illegal immigrants in the jails, but he backed away from that proposal after negotiations with the federal government broke down.

Instead, White opted for the Secure Communities program, which automatically checks the fingerprints of suspects booked into the city jails against a federal immigration database and notifies ICE when suspects have an immigration history.

White has said Secure Communities requires less manpower and money than 287(g), which has been criticized as being vulnerable to racial profiling.

Under 287(g), jailers are trained to assist ICE agents in identifying suspected illegal immigrants based not only on their fingerprint history, but also on how they respond to questioning about their status. Local authorities also are trained to file paperwork to detain suspected illegal immigrants through 287(g), but not through Secure Communities. Technical issues stalled for months the implementation of Secure Communities, city officials said, though White said he planned to have the system working by January.

Patrick Trahan, a spokesman for White, said White was not available for comment and could not provide more details Wednesday. White and Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt plan to hold a news conference this morning and will provide more details then, Trahan said.

Mayor-elect Annise Parker said on the campaign trail that she backs 287(g) and Secure Communities, which are both in place in Harris County's jails. Parker spokeswoman Janice Evans-Davis said Wednesday that Parker was not available for comment on Secure Communities but that her position had not changed on the immigration screening issue.

"The position is that if you get arrested and taken to jail, we're going to check your immigration status," Evans-Davis said.

Curtis Collier, head of the Spring-based U.S. Border Watch organization, which advocates stricter immigration controls, said the Secure Communities system will only flag illegal immigrants who are already on ICE's radar, not those who lack immigration histories in the system.

Collier also said he was concerned that without added manpower from the city, ICE would not be able to respond quickly enough to catch all criminals with immigration records before they post bond.

"It makes no sense to me to participate in the fingerprint part of the program, but not the (manpower) part," Collier said.

Cesar Espinosa, a Houston immigrant advocate, said he has met with members of the mayor's office and police staff to express concerns about Secure Communities. He said the system should be used to check the immigration histories of all inmates in order to prevent racial profiling.

Espinosa said the Secure Communities program is a kind of lesser evil than 287(g), which he called "flawed."

"It's not the best thing, but it is better than 287(g)," Espinosa said of Secure Communities. "We're happy they got away from 287(g)."

Espinosa said immigrant advocates plan to request a meeting with Parker to express concerns about her plans to pursue the program.