

Mayor seeks to allay immigrant fears

Order will prohibit police from asking about citizenship

By John Fritze, The Baltimore Sun

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In response to a controversial federal immigration policy expanded to Baltimore last week, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake will sign an executive order Friday that would prohibit police officers from asking about a person's citizenship status.

The measure comes days after U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said it would begin implementing a program called Secure Communities in the city. Under the program, federal agencies check the immigration status of arrestees booked in local jails and can deport those who are in the country illegally.

Immigrants — both legal and illegal — and city police are concerned that the policy will chill communication between the Hispanic community and law enforcement. The city is particularly worried that witnesses and victims will be less likely to come forward with information for fear of being caught up in immigration court and deported.

The order "will make clear that all victims and witnesses of crime in Baltimore, regardless of immigration status, must be treated with human dignity and respect," Rawlings-Blake said in a statement. "This policy will ensure that victims and witnesses can continue to feel safe reporting" crimes to police.

The executive order will not affect the underlying federal policy. Moreover, city officials have already stated publicly that police will not act as immigration agents. But Rawlings-Blake's administration hopes that formalizing the policy will allay concerns.

Maryland has the 10th-largest population of undocumented immigrants in the country, an estimated 275,000, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. Baltimore and Montgomery County were the final jurisdictions in Maryland to fall under the Secure Communities program, which has led to 670 deportations in the state since 2008.

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