

New Haven resident card program reaches 5 years

By Alexandra Sanders
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NEW HAVEN, Conn.—Before the Elm City resident card was launched, undocumented immigrants were often afraid to report violence. But five years ago, it gave people the power to go to police without fear of deportation, and crime in the Fair Haven neighborhood dropped more than 20 percent.

That is according to Assistant Police Chief Luiz Casanova, who was a district manager in Fair Haven at that time.

"We had a substantial amount of crime committed and not reported," said Casanova. "Witnesses of crime historically did not come forward. (There were) horrific crimes like sexual assaults, rape, home invasions, robberies -- and at least 90 percent of the robbery victims were Hispanic immigrants. Immigrants were known as walking ATMs."

Mayor John DeStefano Jr. recalled when that changed, just before he renewed his own Elm City resident card.

"Five years ago I remember coming to work as I typically do around 6:30 in the morning and looking out the window. and I saw a line of people that started in front of City Hall, stretched down to Church and Elm streets and wrapped around Elm Street going toward Orange Street," he said.

That day, New Haven became the first municipality in the nation to offer identification cards to all residents regardless of immigration status. Since its inception, more than 10,000 cards have been issued, city officials said.

Recently, immigration advocates and city officials gathered in City Hall to reflect on what the Elm City resident card has done for the community and affirm their commitment to continuing and expanding the program.

The card allows holders to open bank accounts, feed parking meters, use city services, interact with police and serves as government identification.

First City Fund Corp., the parent nonprofit of Start Community Bank, is in the process of conducting a feasibility study on the potential rollout of a debit feature for the card. Right now cardholders can load \$150 on the card. The study would examine whether it makes sense to expand that to include a MasterCard, Visa or ATM feature.

"The Elm City resident card is a quintessential symbol that welcomes our immigrant community to the city," said Junta policy analyst Ana Maria Rivera. "Even with the animosity we received as a city and organization during its launch five years ago, we know that this card is pioneering and promoting immigrant integration."

When it was launched, anti-immigration groups protested the idea and after the launch of the card was approved by city officials, several dozen Fair Haven residents became the subject of raids by federal immigration agents.

John Carmona, a founder of Unidad Latina En Accion, said via a translator that getting to the point of the card's launch wasn't easy because of the opposition.

"They came here with posters saying the city of New Haven couldn't do this because it's a violation of the law, but fortunately they mayor's office persisted," he said.

"Mayor DeStefano's great idea is a great idea for Hartford, Middletown, Bridgeport and Stamford," said Matt O'Connor, Local 32BJ political director. "We're reaching out to municipal leaders in those cities about the need for a resident card and the reception has been largely positive, I think in part because the sky didn't fall five years ago and a lot of the naysayers have been proven wrong."

http://www.boston.com/news/local/connecticut/articles/2012/07/29/new_haven_resident_card_program_reaches_5_years/