

Feds to launch Secure Communities program in Mass.

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BOSTON—The U.S. Department of Homeland Security notified state officials Tuesday that despite the objections of Gov. Deval Patrick and immigration activists, they plan to launch a federal program aimed at identifying illegal immigrants arrested for crimes.

Massachusetts Public Safety Secretary Mary Beth Heffernan described the Secure Communities program as an information sharing program between federal agencies that can only be implemented by the federal government.

Heffernan said the program will have no practical effect on how Massachusetts handles fingerprints and information sharing.

"We already send all fingerprints to the federal government and have been doing so for years," Heffernan said. "That practice will continue so we can protect public safety and meet our local law enforcement needs."

Patrick said last year that Massachusetts wouldn't participate in the federal program, which checks the immigration status of people who are arrested.

"I'm persuaded that here in the commonwealth, we will give up more than we get," the Democratic governor said at the time. "We run a serious risk of ethnic profiling and frankly fracturing incredibly important relationships in communities that are necessary for law enforcement."

Supporters of Secure Communities, including Republican U.S. Sen. Scott Brown, say the program is important to help identify illegal immigrants arrested for crimes in Massachusetts.

Brown applauded the move Tuesday, calling it "an important tool in keeping our citizens safe and giving our law enforcement officials, especially the sheriffs, the tools and resources they need to do their jobs."

"The people of Massachusetts will finally have the protection they deserve from violent criminals who have entered our country illegally," Brown said.

Federal officials said the activation of Secure Communities doesn't change a local jurisdiction's existing law enforcement or fingerprinting policies or practices. The only new development is that once the FBI receives the fingerprints, they will send them to the Department of Homeland Security.

The fingerprints will be compared to biometric information in the department's immigration databases. When there is a match, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent will determine whether immigration enforcement action would be appropriate.

Federal officials said the program doesn't authorize local law enforcement agencies to enforce immigration law or give them any other responsibilities.

Immigration officials say all determinations about whether to remove illegal immigrants identified through Secure Communities are made on a case-by-case basis, considering the unique circumstances of each case.

Officials say they consider a number of factors such as criminal record, immigration history, family ties, duration of stay in the U.S., and significant medical and mental health issues.

Immigration activists say the Secure Communities program seeks to criminalize people just because they don't have the proper documentation to live and work in the U.S.

Worcester County Sheriff Lew Evangelidis hailed the decision, pointing to the case of an Ecuadorean man charged with dragging a motorcyclist to his death with his pickup truck in Milford last summer.

Nicolas Guaman pleaded not guilty in Worcester Superior Court to a variety of charges including second-degree murder, manslaughter by motor vehicle and motor vehicle homicide while driving negligently and under the influence of alcohol. He was ordered held without bail.

Authorities say Guaman is an illegal immigrant who was behind the wheel of a pickup truck that struck a motorcycle driven by 23-year-old Matthew Denice.

Police allege Guaman drove a quarter of a mile with Denice stuck in the truck's wheel well, even as witnesses banged on the vehicle begging him to pull over.

"Following the tragic death of Matthew, I made a promise to his family that I would do everything in my power to bring this program to Massachusetts so that other families would not have to endure the pain they suffered," Evangelidis said Tuesday.

http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2012/05/08/feds_to_launch_secure_communities_program_in_mass/