Law Enforcement Officials Expect 'Reboot' Of Secure Communities

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WASHINGTON -- Law enforcement officials said Tuesday they are anticipating a "reboot" of a controversial immigration enforcement program that has faced a growing revolt in recent months.

The officials spoke to reporters on a conference call after meeting on immigration reform with President Barack Obama, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson and other administration officials. The 40-plus law enforcement officials, from groups such as the National Sheriffs Association and Fraternal Order of Police, were broadly supportive of reform, and Obama asked them to keep pressure on House Republicans to enact a bill. He even put out a time frame, citing a "window of two, three months to get the ball rolling in the House of Representatives."

Law enforcement officials are watching Congress' actions on immigration, but they also have a more immediate focus: enforcement programs already in place.

A number of local officials and law enforcement leaders across the country have determined they will no longer cooperate fully with an enforcement program called Secure Communities, which turns over fingerprints taken by police to the Department of Homeland Security so they can be screened for deportable immigrants. Critics of the program argue it leads to too many low-level criminals and non-criminals being turned over to immigration authorities, wastes money, and could make witnesses and victims of crime reluctant to come forward.

As the administration considers making its own changes to enforcement, Austin, Texas, Police Chief Art Acevedo said he expects "a reboot of Secure Communities."

"I got a sense that what they're going to do is they're going to go back, regroup, and they're going to focus their efforts on what we need to focus on," he said on a call organized by the National Immigration Forum's Bibles, Badges and Business project. "We didn't become cops to go chase a nanny that is watching our child, or a farm laborer who is helping us grow our crops. We became cops to go after gang-bangers, MS-13, people who are doing harm to our society."

Robert Haas, police commissioner of Cambridge, Massachusetts, said Johnson told the law enforcement officials that he is aware of past issues with Secure Communities, which has been criticized for confusion during its rollout.

"The secretary was very clear that the mistakes of the past can't be repeated going forward," Haas said. "They have to be very clear and they have to be very precise in terms of what Secure Communities is and what it's not, and I believe the secretary really believes that this is really an opportunity to make sure it is very clear."

DHS spokesman Peter Boogaard said Johnson will continue "to engage with various Members of Congress and stakeholders from all sides of the immigration debate, which represent a diverse set of views and opinions in order to assess areas where we can further align our enforcement policies with our goal of sound law enforcement practice that prioritizes public safety."

The Obama administration has already made changes meant to target serious criminals, and the president said in remarks to the group that he was aware of the tension over police taking on immigration tasks.

"Most of them are not making trouble; most of them are not causing crimes," he said of undocumented immigrants. "And yet, we put them in this tenuous position and it creates a situation in which your personnel, who have got to go after gang-bangers and need to be going after violent criminals and deal with the whole range of challenges, and who have to cooperate with DHS around our counterterrorism activities -- you've got to spend time dealing with somebody who is not causing any other trouble other than the fact that they were trying to make a living for their families. That's just not a good use of our resources. It's not smart. It doesn't make sense."

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