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Report Faults Training of Local Officers in Immigration Enforcement Program

By Julia Preston

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State and local police officers who enforce federal immigration laws are not adequately screened, trained or supervised, and the civil rights of the immigrants they deal with are not consistently protected, according to a report released Friday by the Department of Homeland Security inspector general.

The report by the department's internal watchdog was a sweeping review of a program run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Through agreements signed with about 60 county and state police forces, the program allows local officers to question immigrants about their legal status and detain them for deportation.

The inspector general's report describes the program as haphazardly administered, with local agencies detaining and prosecuting immigrants with little oversight from federal agents and significant inconsistencies from place to place.

"In the absence of consistent supervision over immigration enforcement activities," the report said, "there is no assurance that the program is achieving its goals."

Top officials at Immigration and Customs Enforcement have said the program's priority is to deport immigrants with serious criminal records. But the inspector general found that the program lacked measures to determine whether immigrants detained by local officers were serious offenders.

Without those measures, the report says, ICE cannot be assured "that resources are being appropriately targeted" toward immigrants "who pose the greatest risk to public safety and community."

The report is based on field inspections in the first six months of last year. In July, ICE officials acknowledged widespread criticism of the program, and asked all participating law enforcement agencies to sign new agreements that clarified its goals. In addition, ICE officials said Friday that they had been aware of the inspector general's findings since last year and had taken an array of steps to address them.

"Since the audit was conducted, ICE has fundamentally reformed the program," said an agency spokesman, Richard Rocha, "strengthening public safety and ensuring consistency in

immigration enforcement across the country by prioritizing the arrest and detention of criminal aliens, fulfilling many of the report's recommendations."

The inspector general acknowledged many of the program's improvements. But, the report said, many of the most serious problems remained unresolved.

Based on the report, several immigrant advocate groups on Friday called for the termination of the program, which is commonly known as 287(g), after the clause in immigration law that established it.

The report found that the performance records of local officers were not thoroughly examined before they were allowed to join the program. Without adequate background checks, the report says, the program exposes Department of Homeland Security intelligence systems to "inappropriate or unauthorized access."

Some officers received only cursory training in immigration law, the report found.

"One officer commented that after basic training, he came away with zero knowledge of how to process a case," the report says. Inspectors found that local officers in the program were "not knowledgeable about the asylum process" and other basic tenets of immigration codes.

The report cites the case of an immigrant who had committed no offense but was the victim of a traffic accident. The immigrant was detained by the local police in a county jail until federal agents arrived to check the person's legal status.

The protection of immigrants' civil rights was "not formally included" in the training of local officers, the report found, nor was it taken into account in their performance reviews.