

Vt. now part of feds' 'Secure Communities' program

By Wilson Ring

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MONTPELIER, Vt.—A federal program aimed at identifying illegal immigrants who are arrested for crimes expanded to Vermont on Tuesday, touching off opposition from advocacy groups for immigrants.

Those groups say the Secure Communities program was implemented by the federal government in the state without consulting state officials, and they fear it will help destroy a trust that most of the state's law enforcement community has worked to build with the immigrant community.

The program enables police to check the immigration status of suspected illegal immigrants by sharing their fingerprints with the Department of Homeland Security.

The group Migrant Justice organized a Burlington protest Tuesday afternoon outside the Vermont campaign headquarters of President Barack Obama.

"We held a press conference to express our frustration at President Obama's lack of delivery on immigration reform," said Danilo Lopez through a translator after the demonstration. Lopez is a member of Migrant Justice and a former farm worker from Mexico who was detained by state police during a traffic stop.

The advocates say the program could result in the deportation of people stopped by police for offenses as minor as a broken tail light. "For our communities we know it's going to make a big difference," Migrant Justice organizer Natalia Fajardo said.

The Department of Homeland Security says the program is designed to identify people who have already been arrested for serious crimes. Under the program when state and local law enforcement agencies send fingerprint records to the FBI to check for criminal histories those records will be shared automatically with Homeland Security.

Vermont Public Safety Commissioner Keith Flynn said the state didn't have a choice about participating in the program, but concerns about people being caught up after minor brushes with the law were unfounded.

"This is only going to come into play when it results in an arrest when fingerprints are taken," Flynn said. "The ordinary car stop wouldn't result in fingerprints."

And he said the state's participation in the program wouldn't affect the state police's policy of "bias free" policing, in which troopers don't ask about the immigration status of people they come in contact with unless there has been criminal activity.

"It's very important the inroads we have made with the immigrant community and we want keep that momentum going," Flynn said.

Last month, Homeland Security modified the way the program works so that suspected illegal immigrants arrested on minor traffic violations and who have no criminal histories will only be considered for detention if they are later convicted of those offenses.

Homeland Security says that since the Secure Communities program was implemented in its first jurisdiction in 2008, more than 135,000 illegal immigrants convicted of crimes have been deported. Of those about 49,000 of those were convicted of violent crimes such as murder, rape and the sexual abuse of children.

The program has been implemented in 2,990 jurisdictions in 49 states and Puerto Rico. Maine is now the only state where it has not been implemented.

http://www.boston.com/news/local/vermont/articles/2012/05/22/vt_now_part_of_feds_secure_communities_program/