

Feds force MontCo to join deportation program

By: [Alex Pappas](#) 04/20/11 8:05 PM

The federal government is forcing Montgomery County to participate in a deportation program for violent illegal immigrants that county officials have resisted implementing, according to a Department of Homeland Security official.

The Secure Communities program, run by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, reviews all fingerprints from local jails to identify illegal immigrants. If inmates are found to be illegal, ICE can deport them.

The county only provides fingerprints of some illegal immigrants who have been charged with violent crimes to ICE under its present policy.

In an interview, County Executive Ike Leggett said ICE officials have not spoken with him about their plans for implementation yet.

"I'd have to go back and analyze it with the police department and see what type of reaction they'd have on that, so I have no comment on it and this point," he said.

But Councilwoman Nancy Navarro, D-eastern county, told the Gazette, which first reported the news, that she plans to draft legislation protesting the mandate.

A recent report released by the Migration Policy Institute said area counties known for cracking down on immigration offenses saw a decrease in its illegal immigrant population, while Montgomery County saw a 19 percent increase in the number of its Hispanic illegal immigrants between 2007 and 2009.

Asked why he has been reluctant to implement the program voluntarily -- like other area jurisdictions -- Leggett said the county's "current system has worked fairly well."

"We report a whole series of people who are picked up for crime [to ICE] and we send a list every Monday [of illegal immigrants uncovered] to the federal authorities," he said.

Arthur Wallenstein, the director of the Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, explained that the county provides ICE with information on inmates arrested for violent crimes.

Wallenstein said Leggett told him that he didn't want the county to implement the program until it was mandated by ICE.

He said the jail's procedures wouldn't change very much even if implemented. Capt. Paul Stark, a police spokesman, said the program wouldn't increase the department's workload and only means immigration officials would have access to the department's database of inmates' fingerprints.

The Homeland Security official said the Montgomery County program is likely to begin in September.

Ross Feinstein, a spokesman for ICE, said Secure Communities -- which has led to the deportation of 72,000 nationwide -- is operating in 22 Maryland jurisdictions. He said jurisdictions cannot opt out of the program.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Sheriff Charles Jenkins of nearby Frederick County, known for his tough stances on illegal immigration. "I'm glad to at least see Montgomery County move in that direction."

But one critic from advocacy group Casa of Maryland said he's "deeply disturbed."

"The program does not perform as advertised and ICE knows that," said Gustavo Andrade, an organizing director. "In theory, it was created to identify and deport individuals who are convicted of serious crimes. Instead the vast majority of folks in Maryland deported under Secure Communities -- upwards of 70 percent -- are people who pose no threat to public safety."