



HPD will train jailers on detaining immigrants

But the plan troubles immigrants' advocates

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July 11, 2009, 12:58AM

The Houston Police Department has been approved to participate in a controversial federal program that would train a cadre of city jailers to help detain suspected illegal immigrants, immigration officials announced Friday.

The announcement by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials comes nearly four months after Mayor Bill White requested that federal officials expedite training for city jailers.

White made the request within days of the March 5 shooting of Houston police officer Rick Salter, who was critically injured by an illegal immigrant with a criminal record. Salter is recovering.

HPD and White have faced pressure for years to change the city's policy for dealing with suspected illegal immigrants. Critics have called Houston a "Sanctuary City" — a label White has fought vehemently — because of a long-standing policy that prohibits HPD officers from questioning suspects on the streets about their citizenship.

Through the program, city jails would get special training that will allow them to question inmates about their immigration status and hold them for federal agents.

City spokesman Frank Michel said Friday that Houston police and the mayor's office had yet to receive or sign the documents formalizing HPD's participation in the program, known as 287(g) and could not comment.

Michel said the city intends to participate but wants to see more specifics on changes announced for the program nationally on Friday.

The news was praised by Houston Police Union members but met with dismay by immigrant advocates, who have held protests since March against the city's planned participation.

Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt previously estimated that joining the jail program will require 22 police officers to receive the federal training and cost an estimated \$1.5 million to \$2 million a year to operate. The chief also said the department pledged years ago it would not allow officers to question residents at random about their immigration status.

Cesar Espinosa, a Houston immigrant advocate, said Friday he was saddened by the news it had been approved.

"From the beginning we have said that this is not about enforcing immigration law — it's about community safety," Espinosa said. "If people start associating the Houston Police Department with immigration, people are going to be more afraid

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to come forward both as victims and as witnesses of crimes.”

Gary Blankinship, president of the Houston Police Officers’ Union, said he was encouraged that city jailers will receive training through the program. “I think it’s a step in the right direction,” he said. “I think it’s a small step.”

After HPD officer Rodney Johnson was killed in 2006 by a previously deported felon, HPD and immigration officials pledged to improve cooperation. HPD gave ICE full access to city jails and started referring to ICE previously deported felons and suspects with immigration warrants identified during fingerprint checks.

A Houston Chronicle report in March showed that fewer than 1 percent of more than 58,000 suspects booked only into the city’s jails in 2008 had been detained for immigration officials. During the same time frame, the Harris County Sheriff’s Office’s screening program led to the detention of 9,110 suspected illegal immigrants for ICE in 2008 — about 7 percent of all bookings.

Harris County signed up for the 287(g) program in August and sent nine jailers and detention officers for federal training through the program.

Since the agency completed the training, it has averaged more than 950 referrals of suspected illegal immigrants each month to ICE, nearly double the average prior to 287(g).

HPD was one of 11 agencies approved for 287(g) on Friday. On Friday, ICE announced plans to

require all participants in the 287(g) program to sign new agreements that include more specific enforcement and oversight guidelines. ICE chief John Morton said the changes will help ensure the program tightly focuses efforts on criminals who are “the worst of the worst.”

Nationally, the 287(g) program has been criticized as being vulnerable to racial profiling and lacking oversight by ICE.

Chronicle reporter Stewart M. Powell in Washington contributed.

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