



NEWS Texas/Southwest

Consuls say Irving overzealous, but mayor defends crackdown on illegal immigrants

Rise in deportations leaves some immigrants feeling empty

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Mexican Consul Enrique Hubbard Urrea has issued an unusual warning to immigrants from his country: Avoid the city of Irving.

Deportations in this city have skyrocketed in the last several months – from 262 in all of 2006 to 1,338 through mid-September.

"In this city, one has to be extra careful," he told *Al Día*. "And if possible, avoid going through there, because we suspect, and with good reason, that people are being detained simply because of their appearance."

At least 1,600 people have been turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement since June 2006 as part of the Criminal Alien Program, which provides for round-the-clock communication with federal authorities and is designed to detain illegal immigrants who have been accused of a crime.

The program is the latest tool being used by local governments – in the absence of a federal overhaul of immigration laws – as they struggle with problems created by illegal immigration. Some residents in Irving have complained that illegal immigrants have transformed the city in negative ways – with too many people crammed into dilapidated homes, and neighbors parking too many cars in their yards.

And Irving Mayor Herbert Gears says that he will "utilize whatever we are able to use to reduce crime and improve the quality of life in Irving, and that includes for the immigrant population."

But consulate officials say they believe innocent people are being unfairly targeted.

Consuls from El Salvador and Mexico met with Mr. Gears and Police Chief Larry Boyd nearly two months ago to talk about the rising number of deportations. During that meeting, the mayor said officials were checking out complaints to determine whether anyone had been stopped without cause.

But "the complaints keep pouring in and nothing's changed," Mr. Hubbard said.

Mr. Gears said he knew of some two dozen complaints filed with foreign consulates about Irving's program during its first few months. And while he says he's determined to investigate and follow up on each one, he stands behind the program.

But Mr. Gears said he understands the Mexican Consulate's message.

"His warning is significant," he said. "The representatives of that office are serving their constituents well with that communication."

The Irving City Council unanimously approved an ordinance adopting the Criminal Alien Program earlier this year after police began practicing it in 2006.

Mr. Gears said he believes Irving turns over more illegal immigrants for deportation than any other city in the country. And he estimates the number at about 300 people a month – from 23 countries, including Mexico and El Salvador.

The No. 1 offense that people are arrested for is driving with a suspended license, he said.

Mr. Gears, however, opposes using a federal program called "287g" that trains local officers and jailers to act as immigration officers.

"Why do we have to turn our officers over to the federal government?" he asked.

Irving City Council member Beth Van Duyne, one of two council members who favor 287g, believes city officials are obligated to uphold federal law.

Ms. Van Duyne said it's not an issue of race or nationality.

"I want to offer everybody an equal opportunity, but within the framework of our laws," she said.

Differences with Farmers Branch

Ms. Van Duyne said she doesn't want to create new ordinances like the one in neighboring Farmers Branch, but she does believe the city should use available resources and programs in response to illegal immigrants.

And she sees her responsibilities as providing clean streets and safe neighborhoods and helping school districts provide outstanding education.

"Illegal immigration plays a part in that," she said, "but it's only one piece of the puzzle."

While Mr. Gears and Ms. Van Duyne don't see eye to eye on how involved the Irving Police Department should be in monitoring illegal immigration, neither wants to follow Farmers Branch's footsteps.

Mr. Gears is opposed to the methods of Farmers Branch City Council member Tim O'Hare, the driving force behind the measure that would ban most illegal immigrants from renting apartments in that city. And Ms. Van Duyne doesn't want to attract lawsuits.

Both the Mexico and El Salvador consuls said they would like to meet with Irving authorities again to discuss the issue.

"According to several accounts this week, some residents were in the common areas at an apartment complex, cooking out, when the police arrived and began asking questions about their legal status," said Eduardo Rea, spokesman for the Mexican Consulate.

Of 75 notifications of detentions that the consulate received this week, 28 took place in the city of Irving, said Mr. Rea, adding that there are typically 150 detentions throughout the Dallas-Fort Worth area in a week.

El Salvador's Consul Mario Roger Hernández said that people should think hard about whether to drive through certain cities – but he stressed that the Salvadoran community is aware of the current environment in the U.S. as it pertains to illegal immigration.

"We've had a real crackdown in the last several years – in some cities more than in others – on illegal immigrants," he said. "And even more those who have orders of deportation. Knowing that, people should think carefully about decisions they make."

Mexican consulates have a mixed record of defending Mexican immigrants, said Roberto Calderón, a historian at the

University of North Texas. One of the more prominent cases was in the 1930s and is a successful school desegregation case known as the "Lemon Grove Incident."

In that California case, the Mexican Consulate helped obtain legal counsel for families relegated to what was considered an inferior school. Many of the children were U.S. citizens.

The crackdown, the fallout

The crackdown has been tough both on families and business owners in Irving.

Carlos Quintanilla, a community leader, said he was planning to go before the City Council to ask that the program be terminated. And he warned that he would begin organizing a boycott if the city persisted and "ask that the Cinco de Mayo celebration be canceled in that city."

Darío Velásquez of Honduras said he had to entrust his two children, ages 3 and 7, to a woman he barely knows so that she could take them to his wife in Honduras. His wife was deported in August after being involved in a traffic accident.

"She didn't have a driver's license, so they took her to jail," he said. "There, Immigration picked her up and took her to one of their centers. From there, she was deported."

Mrs. Velásquez also had a previous deportation order on her record.

Mr. Velásquez, who has temporary protected status, said he'll stay, continue working and keep sending money home.

Carlos Blanco, a naturalized citizen from El Salvador, said his wife, too, was detained by Irving police during a routine traffic stop because she didn't have a driver's license or any other identification. She was arrested and taken to jail.

A week ago, she was sent back to El Salvador, and Mr. Blanco sent their 6-year-old to join her.

He since has left Irving and moved to an apartment in Dallas with a friend.

"I talked with the official on the phone when she was detained," he said. "And he told me that he was taking her to jail and that I could pay \$400 to get her out. But that was a lie."

Carlitos Torres, who runs a Rent-A-Center in the city, said the crackdown has also manifested itself in his business. He's had to make trips to several apartments in the last several months to pick up furniture abandoned by people who have been deported.

"We get at least one a week," he said.

Carmen Ibarra, who works at the Salón de Belleza Bambi on Grauwlyer Street, said she hasn't seen anything like it in the 13 years she's lived there.

"We used to have eight stylists, and now there's only five of us," said Ms. Ibarra, who is thinking about moving to Plano. "And we've gone from doing 30 haircuts a day to sometimes just five."

Pedestrians walking around the shopping centers said they are afraid to get out, and instead of feeling safe when they see a squad car, they now feel afraid.

"I'm afraid for my son, who has a lawn business, even though he's a grown man," said María Carcomo, a native of El Salvador. "I'm afraid they'll call me one of these days and tell me they're going to deport him."

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