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Police union calls for change in Phoenix's immigration policy

Policy prevents cops from calling immigration officers when illegal immigrants commit civil traffic violations.

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PHOENIX -- A union for police officers broke with leaders of the Phoenix Police Department on Monday in calling for an end to an immigration policy that the union says makes streets in the nation's fifth largest city more dangerous.

The policy prevents police officers from asking federal immigration authorities for assistance in situations where illegal immigrants commit civil traffic violations.

The restriction and other city rules for handling illegal immigrants have long been criticized by advocates for tough border enforcement, who reject the long-held notion that immigration is a sole responsibility of the federal government. But such criticism has never surfaced publicly from the officers themselves.

"If we allow a little bit of lawlessness, what prevents more lawlessness from occurring," asked Mark Spencer, president of the Phoenix Law Enforcement Association, which represents more than 2,200 officers and detectives in the Phoenix Police Department.

Spencer said the call for a change was based on frustrations that officers feel in seeing crimes tied to illegal immigration and wasn't inspired by last month's death of a police officer at the hands of an illegal immigrant.

After his release from prison and subsequent deportation, the immigrant sneaked

into the country again and was arrested for misdemeanor assault in Scottsdale but wasn't reported to federal immigration authorities. The immigrant was fatally shot by police as he pointed a gun at a carjacking victim's head.

Spencer, whose group isn't advocating local immigration enforcement, said criminal threats can sometimes be eliminated when officers confront people committing minor violations.

Jack Harris, who leads the city's police department, said he was open to the union's suggestion, but that he must consider whether such a change would be in Phoenix's best interest.

Harris said the policy centers on immigrants who haven't committed a crime and are suspected only of entering the country illegally.

While few local law enforcement agencies in Arizona enforce immigration law, many local police have arrested illegal immigrants who violate state crimes.

Phoenix's policies for handling illegal immigrants are frequently cited by some state lawmakers who have pushed unsuccessful proposals that would have done away with those practices.

Under the policy, the Phoenix Police Department can call federal immigration authorities in cases where immigrant smuggling vehicles are pulled over or scores of illegal immigrants are found hidden in houses run by smugglers.

But officers aren't allowed to stop people for the sole purpose of determining their immigration status. Also, Phoenix police aren't to arrest people whose only violation is an infraction of federal immigration law.

The union was requesting changes only to the prohibition on calling federal immigration authorities for those with civil traffic violations.

Harris and other police bosses in Arizona held a news conference Monday to renew their opposition to suggestions that local police conduct day-to-day immigration enforcement.

The police bosses said local immigration enforce would jeopardize the trust that police officers have built with immigrant communities and detract from their traditional roles in cracking down on thefts, violence and other crimes.

"Immigration enforcement poses a tremendous responsibility that will compete

with other priorities," said Ralph Tranter, executive director of the Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police. "It's going to be very difficult to balance those resources."

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