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Gov. looks at larger border role for police

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PHOENIX - Gov. Janet Napolitano said Wednesday she wants to see if there is a way to have state and local police take a larger role in dealing with illegal border crossers.

She said federal agencies, by themselves, cannot stop the flow of people across the border, a figure she put at 4,000 a day.

Local cooperation is necessary, she said, "to reduce the number of undocumented immigrants."

The move comes less than a month after Napolitano vetoed legislation that would have permitted - not required - local police to enforce federal immigration law. She said Wednesday she is not backing away from that decision.

Yet Napolitano, in discussing that veto, said she is not convinced of claims by law-enforcement officers that giving them any role in immigration law would undermine their ability to do their other jobs.

Eric Edwards, who represents local police chiefs and county sheriffs, said there are legitimate reasons police don't want to be questioning people about their legal status in this country. "They're very concerned about developing some trust in this community so that they do feel free to come forward as a victim or as witness to assist in the much more serious crimes," he said.

Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio said deputies talk with illegal entrants on the streets or at work "not to put them in jail, but also to get information leading up to who caused them to be smuggled into this country."

But Napolitano said Wednesday she's not convinced that having local police enforce federal immigration laws will dry up their sources in the immigrant community.

"I know that's what they say," she said. "But I think it's something that needs to be fleshed out. Is that really true? Are there things that can or should be done that would not implicate that concern?"

She said that opening the door for local police to enforce federal law still leaves some "big questions" to be answered.

"Who's responsible for training local folks in immigration enforcement?" she asked. "How do you do that and not step over the line into racial profiling?"

She said one possibility is finding ways to have local authorities assist federal law enforcement "without themselves making immigration arrests and making the determination of alienage."

And one option, she said, would be to have different practices in the border counties than the rest of the state.

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