

Feds defend Arpaio on crime sweeps

Immigration officials say sheriff is following law

by Daniel González - Apr. 5, 2008 12:00 AM

The Arizona Republic

Top federal immigration officials on Friday defended Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's recent crime sweeps, rejecting critics' arguments that the sheriff is violating an agreement that allows deputies to enforce immigration laws.

The officials made their remarks as 38 new officers at five Arizona law-enforcement agencies were sworn in to enforce federal immigration laws. The federally trained officers are members of the Phoenix Police Department, the Arizona Department of Public Safety, and the Pima, Pinal and Yavapai county sheriff's offices. Now, with more than 200 trained officers and jail officials, Arizona has the most of any state in nation.

Asked about the intensifying controversy over sweeps in Phoenix and Guadalupe, Matthew Allen, newly appointed special agent in charge of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Arizona, rebuffed accusations that Arpaio is conducting immigration raids masked as crime sweeps. Jim Pendergraph, who coordinates an ICE program that trains local police in immigration enforcement, agreed.

They said Arpaio is enforcing state laws and, in the process, arresting illegal immigrants, which is permitted under an agreement between ICE and the Sheriff's Office.

"He has stayed within the bounds of the agreement," Allen said.

Pendergraph said he even drove to Guadalupe on Thursday to see Arpaio's operation for himself and "I saw nothing that gave me heartburn."

The crime sweeps, held recently in largely immigrant and Hispanic neighborhoods in Guadalupe and Phoenix, have sparked large-scale protests accusing Arpaio of conducting immigration raids based on racial-profiling.

Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon and Guadalupe Mayor Rebecca Jimenez have blasted the crime sweeps. Phoenix Police Chief Jack Harris also asked ICE officials to look into whether Arpaio's crime sweeps were appropriate under the agreement.

Arpaio has maintained that he is not targeting suspects based on race and that the sweeps were in response to complaints of crime from business people and community leaders.

On Friday, he continued with a second day of sweeps in Guadalupe, despite the objections of the mayor and hundreds of protesters. He said he was considering doing more sweeps in Mesa after eight state legislators signed a letter asking him to focus his crime-suppression activities on the southeast Valley.

"We are going to arrest any illegal immigrants we come across," Arpaio said.

Arpaio's deputies are allowed to double as immigration agents under a federal program known as 287 (g). The program also allows jail personnel to identify foreign-born criminals in jails and prisons and process them for deportation.

Most of the seven Arizona agencies participating in the program have 10 or fewer officers and jail officials trained in immigration enforcement. The Maricopa County Sheriff's Office has 160.

Congressional auditors are conducting a probe of the program to see how well it is working in Arizona and other parts of the country. Their report is expected in the fall.

The additional Arizona officers sworn in Friday raised questions about whether more immigration sweeps will take place in other parts of the state.

Alessandra Soler Meetze, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona, said she fears more local police will question drivers about their immigration status during traffic stops. That could lead to civil-rights violations and racial-profiling involving immigrants and U.S. citizens, she said.

But law-enforcement officials insisted Friday that they do not plan to use ICE-trained officers to do crime sweeps similar to Arpaio's. Instead, the officers will be used for targeted operations aimed at arresting and deporting foreign-born criminals tied to immigrant and drug-smuggling and other criminal rings, they said.

One sergeant and four detectives from the Phoenix violent-crimes bureau completed the four-week ICE training, the first in the department to do so.

The department in recent months has taken heat from both sides of the immigration debate. Border-control advocates want the agency to get more involved in arresting illegal immigrants, and immigrant advocates say immigration enforcement should be left to the federal government.

Joe Klima, commander of the Phoenix violent-crimes bureau, said the five officers will go after violent criminals associated with human-smuggling organizations.

"We will not use this for routine immigration enforcement," Klima said.

Pinal County Sheriff Chris Vasquez did not rule out the possibility that his five newly trained deputies will be used to arrest illegal immigrants following traffic stops, but that will not be the main focus. The deputies will instead focus on combating smuggling groups that transport illegal immigrants through Pinal County. The county is a major corridor for transporting illegal immigrants and drugs from the border into the United States, Vasquez said.

"We will go after the biggest threat, and right now, the biggest threat is not undocumented immigrants who are coming here to work as landscapers or restaurant workers," Vasquez said.

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