

Castle seeks help for police on immigration (The News Journal)

Grants, training sought for local officers

By SUMMER HARLOW

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Georgetown Police Chief William Topping is less than pleased with the heat his department takes over illegal immigration and police outreach to the Spanish-speaking community.

He's used to residents from all over Delaware -- not just Georgetown -- criticizing him and his officers for not arresting every individual who can't prove legal residence in the United States.

But with as many as 4,000 undocumented immigrants living in Georgetown, arresting them -- not to mention aiding those who are victims or witnesses to crimes -- is just not that simple.

"No municipal police department in the land has the power to say 'I think you're illegal and I'm going to deport you,'" Topping said. Nor would they want to.

Between unlicensed drivers, fraudulent identification cards, drunk and disorderly conduct, cultural clashes and victimized immigrants targeted for crime, Topping estimates up to 75 percent of his department's resources are spent dealing with the town's mostly Guatemalan immigrant population.

And the department needs help, which is why Topping and other Sussex County law enforcement officials and community leaders have been meeting with Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del.

"We don't need more ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents,"

Topping said. "We need assistance in dealing with this at the local level."

On Tuesday, Castle sent Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff a letter asking what more could be done to improve local law enforcement agencies' access to ICE databases, what Spanish-language training and grants are available to officers, and whether there is law-enforcement training for issues such as document-fraud detection.

"In places like Georgetown, Delaware, law enforcement officers routinely investigate violent crimes that involve undocumented aliens as both the suspects and the victims," Castle wrote. "Such investigations are hindered by problems such as the inability to determine the true identity of those involved and the prevalence of fraudulent identification documents."

It's not just Sussex County.

As many as 35,000 undocumented immigrants called the First State home in 2005, according to a 2006 report from the Pew Hispanic Center.

In part because of the language barrier and their mistrust of police, officers' dealings with undocumented immigrants are much more time- and labor-intensive, Topping said.

Since last fall, Georgetown residents, police and community leaders have been meeting to brainstorm ideas for a safety campaign targeting Spanish speakers. The bilingual Delaware Safety Campaign is aimed at explaining local laws and building trust between police and immigrants, said Jose Somalo, owner of the bilingual newspaper Hoy en Delaware and a part of the campaign.

Topping repeatedly has said officers aren't looking to report victims or witnesses to immigration officials -- just the criminals.

"If

we arrest you for assault, or domestic violence, or rape, we're locking you up and going to make sure you get deported," he said. He's pushing to increase the number of deportable offenses to include drunken driving.

Local officers can't be expected to tackle a broken immigration system themselves -- it's a federal issue, Castle said.

But in light of last year's failed immigration reform and the unlikelihood for reform this year, smaller measures have to be undertaken to help police departments now, Castle said.

"Law enforcement has to have the ability to do its job properly, and that's what we're talking about," Castle said. "It's not a question of providing a social service, it's community protection."