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Law creates 'barrier of trust' between police, immigrants

 By Jason Jacks
10/20/2004

Hardly a day passes that Elmer Arias, the owner of La Hacienda Restaurant in Springfield's Brookfield Plaza, does not hear the rumors swirling through the local Hispanic community about what Fairfax police are now empowered to do by a new state law.

"People are really scared," he said, especially Hispanic immigrant women caught in abusive relationships. They are shying away from police in fear of being deported, he said.

This particular law, which went into effect July 1, gives state and county police the authority to hold illegal immigrants, suspected of committing a crime, in jail without a warrant for up to 72 hours. However, police can only detain immigrants who returned to the U.S. after already having been deported because of a previous felony conviction, according to the law.

There are about 100,000 illegal aliens living in Virginia, according to some census reports.

The law has created a "barrier of trust" between police and the Hispanic population, said Fairfax County Police Chief Dave Roher, who acknowledged hearing stories of immigrants hoarding food and water to avoid going outside their homes in fear of being snatched up by the police.

To help ease those fears and alleviate misinformation about the law, Arias, also the president of the local Salvadoran American Chamber of Commerce, along with Del. Mark Sickles (D-43rd), arranged an Oct. 12 question-and-answer session with Hispanic leaders, elected officials and Fairfax police at Arias' restaurant.

"Someone is spreading rumors that this law does something that the law does not do," said Springfield Del. Dave Albo (R-42nd), who was the chief patron of the bill that created the law during the last legislative session and one of the speakers at the meeting.

The law was created to be another tool in the fight against gangs and terrorism, he said.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerry Connolly (D) said he is not a fan of the law, which has not been enforced yet in Fairfax because it puts county police in the uncomfortable position of acting as federal agents.

"Speaking for the Fairfax government, we are not in the immigration and U.S. naturalization business," he said. "This is a federal responsibility. ... If


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someone comes here to work hard and raise a family, then we are all for that."

Tim Freilich, managing attorney for the Virginia Justice Center, an organization closely monitoring the law, said immigrants who were victims of crime have come into his office looking for help instead of going to the police.

"It is just so unfortunate that the state assembly would pass a law without properly educating the community," he said.

Afterward, Arias said he thought the meeting accomplished what he intended.

"We wanted this meeting to send the message that this bill [HB 570] is for people who are committing crimes," he said.

Springfield businessman Rafael Parada said the meeting was important to him because it laid to rest some of the rumors he had been hearing throughout the Hispanic community about the law.

"This rumor was spreading that the police could just come get you ... and send you out of the country," he said. "This [meeting] was very helpful."

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