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Worker arrests not tied to illegals drive

By Jon Ward

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Prince William County police said yesterday that recent arrests of day laborers in Woodbridge had nothing to do with a crackdown on illegal immigrants.

"This was purely a community maintenance issue," said Capt. Tim Rudy. "To us, this was not a day laborer issue or an immigration issue. It was a group of county people breaking a county ordinance."

Prince William police arrested 22 day laborers at a Woodbridge 7-Eleven on Oct. 19 for loitering, after warning them for several weeks that they should not gather around the convenience store and that they should disperse by 9 a.m.

Capt. Rudy said he was receiving numerous complaints about disorderly conduct by some of the day laborers such as public drunkenness, urinating in public, and harassment of women who were entering a nearby rape crisis counseling center.

When 11 of 22 arrested could not produce identification, they were taken into custody. The others with identification were given court summonses and released.

When police ran the names of the 11 in custody through their identification system at the adult detention center, some of them were flagged with deportation notices from the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The 11 men are facing deportation.

However, the arrests have alarmed many in the immigrant community, said Tim Freilich, managing attorney for the Virginia Justice Center, a five-year old nonprofit that works on behalf of immigrant workers.

Following the enactment in July of a new state law allowing local and state police to arrest illegal immigrants, the day laborers are the first to be arrested by local authorities and handed over to ICE. Prince William and Fairfax police both said they have not arrested anyone under the new provision since it went into effect.

"The use of state and local law enforcement to enforce federal immigration law is a topic of concern for many in the immigrant communities in Virginia," Mr. Freilich said. The arrests, he said, will "send fear throughout the communities, and will undercut the community policing efforts of Prince William county and other jurisdictions throughout Virginia."

But the new law has been incorrectly linked to the arrests of the day laborers, according to Capt. Rudy.

The law, as written, gives local and state police the power to arrest an immigrant for being in the United States illegally if he or she has been convicted of a felony and has been deported or left the country previously.

Delegate David B. Albo, Fairfax Republican, wrote the bill after hearing testimony from Virginia Beach police that they could do nothing about known gang members they saw on

the street, even though police knew the men had been previously convicted of crimes like malicious wounding and then deported, only to return.

Police have had to work with the immigrant community, however, to clear up misunderstandings. They have broadcast public service announcements on local television in Spanish, and recently conducted an open forum discussion with Hispanic community leaders.

"Every single person at that meeting, I think, left understanding the law. The question is whether they would go and tell their friends and groups," Mr. Albo said.

"There's somebody out there, or groups out there, running around telling people that this law does things that it doesn't do ... They're just trying to scare people. I don't understand the agenda," he said.

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