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Dems: ICE should focus on criminals, not workers

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WASHINGTON - While the nation's immigration officers have increasingly raided job sites, hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants sit in prisons. Yet rather than being deported, they often are released into the community.

This week in Congress, Democrats -- with little resistance from Republicans -- are trying to force the Bush administration to focus more on the criminals and less on the working folk. They want to give \$800 million to Immigration and Customs Enforcement so the agency can try harder to deport illegal immigrants who have committed crimes.

That would mean more money for ferreting out criminals in North Carolina's jails and prisons, for a growing partnership between federal immigration authorities and county sheriffs, and for federal squads that hunt fugitives.

The effort was pushed this week by U.S. Rep. David Price, who, in his second year at the helm of the Homeland Security spending panel, is trying to increase his influence over the agency's immigration policies.

Price, a Chapel Hill Democrat, is shepherding through next year's spending package for the Department of Homeland Security. It passed a key House committee Tuesday and now goes to the House floor. The full House is expected to vote on the measure later this summer.

This week's work continues a theme Price has been sounding since becoming a subcommittee chairman in 2007. Last year, he battled to spend money helping federal officials search local jails to find illegal immigrants who have committed crimes.

This spring, Price slammed federal immigration enforcement chief Julie Myers for not doing enough with the money on hand.

"It's one thing everybody agrees on that has to be at the top of the list -- and yet they haven't done it," Price said in an interview Tuesday.

A burst of workplace raids

But, in fact, not everyone agrees.

"What he's saying is he doesn't want to enforce our immigration laws except on a narrow group of people," said Steven Camarota, research director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington think tank that advocates for less immigration. "He's saying he doesn't really want the law enforced."

To truly ferret out illegal immigrants, Camarota said, the government must focus on workers and the employers who hire them.



Price says ICE has its priorities wrong.

That happened last year.

Federal immigration agents increased their workplace arrests of non-criminals by 816 percent in 2007 over 2003, scooping up 4,077 illegal immigrants without criminal records, according to numbers the agency provided the House Appropriations Committee.

Among those were raids at Smithfield Packing's slaughterhouse in Tar Heel, N.C., in January and August 2007. More than 50 people were arrested.

Many of those jailed and deported left behind U.S.-born children, a reality borne out in other raids that has horrified immigrant advocacy groups.

In the same period, deportations of criminal aliens increased only 16 percent.

Price said that isn't enough.

"The department should be as zealous in deporting criminals as it is in disrupting immigrant employment," Price said. "In fact, it should be more zealous."

Sheriffs want in

The policy could have a sweeping impact in North Carolina, home to one of the country's fastest-growing immigrant populations.

The federal 287(g) program, which deputizes local law enforcement officers as federal immigration cops, is picking up in popularity among urban sheriff's departments. Wake County will soon begin participating.

And Republican Sen. Elizabeth Dole, who is running for re-election, has spent the past year shoring up support among rural sheriffs for a statewide program to help smaller counties share information with federal authorities. Immigration enforcement has become a key issue in her race against Democratic state Sen. Kay Hagan.

In Congress, few Republicans challenged Price's recommendations Tuesday. Jennifer Hing, a spokeswoman for Reps. Jerry Lewis of California and Hal Rogers of Kentucky, the top Republicans on the Appropriations Committee and the Homeland Security subcommittee, said a "balance must be struck" among all the enforcement options.

Camarota of the Center for Immigration Studies said Democrats and Republicans are trying to straddle a line that helps needy employers while avoiding the moral uneasiness of deporting family breadwinners.

"If you want the law enforced, this is not good news," he said.

Irene Godinez, advocacy director and lobbyist at El Pueblo, a Raleigh-based Latino advocacy group, said she's troubled that Congress is emphasizing the 287(g) program. She said early numbers from North Carolina indicate most people are being deported after being accused of lesser crimes such as driving without a license.

"It's very troublesome, because what we've seen up until now is the program is not focusing on criminal aliens," Godinez said.

Plenty left in the bank

Price fought last year to give \$200 million to the Bush administration to identify and remove the estimated 300,000 to 450,000 illegal immigrants now in federal, state and local jails and prisons.

A year later, the department has spent just \$25 million of that allocation. "They seem to have lacked a sense of priorities," Price said.

ICE spokesman Richard Rocha defended the agency's work. "I think ICE has done an

outstanding job so far and is increasing its ability to identify and remove criminal aliens," he said.

He would not comment on the bill because it is pending legislation, but Rocha said the agency needs to continue its workplace enforcement work as well.

"It's equally important that we enforce all the laws," Rocha said.

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