

Priority Enforcement Program – How DHS is Focusing on Deporting Felons

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President Obama and I are committed to sensible and effective enforcement of our immigration laws to safeguard our borders and protect public safety and national security.

That is why, as part of the executive actions the President announced last November, we ended the controversial Secure Communities program. This was a program by which our immigration personnel lodged orders known as “detainers” to hold individuals in local jails, so that they could be handed directly over to federal authorities for enforcement purposes after their time in local custody. The goal of the program was to make it easier to identify and remove convicted criminals. But, in many instances the program led to the transfer of those who had been in this country for years, and had simply been picked up and charged with a minor offense, without a conviction. As a result, the Secure Communities program became embroiled in political and legal controversy. And, in reaction, a rapidly expanding list of city, county and state governments enacted laws and directives that limit or outright prohibit their cooperation with federal immigration enforcement personnel. The consequences nationwide have included documented cases in which dangerous individuals on whom we placed detainers were released to the streets, and committed more serious crimes.

We have now acted to stop this ineffective program. We have ended the Secure Communities program, and are replacing it with a new “Priority Enforcement Program.” Our overarching goal, which we believe is shared by every governor, mayor, state legislature, city council and county commission, is keeping our streets safe. The President and I want to better focus our immigration enforcement resources on convicted criminals over undocumented immigrants who have been here for years, have committed no serious crimes, and, have, in effect, become peaceful and integrated members of the community. To do this, however, requires that we go where removable, dangerous criminals are most often found -- behind bars.

Our new Priority Enforcement Program is a balanced, common-sense approach to help us achieve this goal. It removes the controversy that consumed the Secure Communities program. With some limited exceptions, we are replacing detainers with “requests for notification” and are no longer requesting the transfer of someone based merely on a warrant or arrest—we’re going to stay focused on our top priorities, like

those who have been convicted of serious crimes. The program will better ensure the premise of our criminal justice system, that individuals are innocent until proven guilty. For those who have been convicted of a serious crime, and are removable from the country, we want to deport them as soon as possible so that our communities are as safe as possible.

But, the federal government cannot make a success of this new policy alone. We need a partner in state and local law enforcement. It is for this reason that I and other officials of the Department of Homeland Security have set out across the country to meet with state and local officials, including those in law enforcement, to show them our new policy, and encourage them to work with us again. I am pleased by the vote by the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors, encouraging the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department to work closely with DHS and ICE to implement the new PEP program. We will continue to work with the Sheriff’s office and local elected officials in Los Angeles and across the country to implement PEP in a way that supports community policing and public safety while ensuring that ICE takes custody of dangerous individuals before they are released into the community. ICE is also committed to engaging with community members and providing the public with more information about the PEP program.

We must work together to enforce our immigration laws in a smart and cooperative way, in line with our enforcement priorities, and for the sake of the public safety we are all pledged to protect. ✨