

Contra Costa sheriff's tie to ICE riles immigrants' advocates

By Otis R. Taylor Jr., San Francisco Chronicle
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Photo: Andrew Harnik, Associated Press

Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, center, accompanied by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Acting Director Thomas Homan, right, and a member of his security detail, attends a news conference at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection headquarters in Washington, Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2017, to discuss the operational implementation of the president's executive orders. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

As talk of a travel ban, the construction of a massive wall and the status of sanctuary cities percolates in the United States, another immigration issue is near a boiling point in Contra Costa County.

How cozy is the Sheriff's Office with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency commonly referred to as ICE? Pretty snug. The government runs a federal immigration detention center in one of Contra

Costa County's jail buildings — the West County Detention Facility in Richmond.

The county receives about \$6 million a year from the feds to run the detention facility, about \$3 million after costs are deducted. As of Tuesday, there were 197 people being held for ICE, according to John Gioia, a member of the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors.

Gioia told me that the contract's cost to the community outweighs the revenue.

“And the cost is the trust of our immigrant communities,” he said. “It causes the immigrant community to have less faith in law enforcement.”

As mayors in San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland and San Jose are forcefully denouncing [crackdowns on immigrants](#) living in the country without permission, Contra Costa is drawing heat from critics who want it to cool its relationship with ICE.

What's more, Contra Costa County is listed as a sanctuary for immigrants as it rakes in money for operating a deportation pen.

“Here in Contra Costa County, sometimes it feels like we're the Alabama of the Bay Area,” said Ali Saidi, a county public defender. “We're the forgotten county out here. The other counties in the Bay Area, they step up and they declare loudly to the community, ‘We are with you.’”

Claudia Jimenez of Contra Costa County Racial Justice Coalition, a racial equality organization, said immigrants who don't pose a risk to the community have been turned over to ICE for deportation. She sees it as a violation of California's [Trust Act](#).

While the 2014 law doesn't prevent local law enforcement from working with ICE, it restricts county jails from detaining people longer than necessary so custody can be transferred to ICE agents. The Trust Act ensures that nonviolent offenders are not held for deportation.

And not all immigrants Contra Costa County holds for ICE have been charged with a crime, Jimenez said.

Contra Costa County Sheriff David O. Livingston has said his office complies with the Trust Act, but he didn't respond to repeated requests for an interview.

"We've seen over the last year that he hasn't kept his word," Jimenez said.

At a Jan. 25 protest outside his office, Livingston briefly emerged from the lobby that had been blocked by stone-faced officers. He agreed to meet with protest organizers to discuss his position. According to Jimenez, who's been lobbying Livingston to quit collaborating with ICE, the meeting has been set for Feb. 23.

But she isn't hopeful anything will be accomplished — or changed.

"We don't trust Sheriff Livingston," she said. "It has just been impossible with him."

Since Cowboy Don began his xenophobic and nationalistic campaign with promises of a Mexican border wall, there's been an erosion of faith in law enforcement within immigrant communities. How many immigrants, who had hoped for a better life for their children in America, are now going to keep their kids home from school out of fear?

What's worse, how many more crimes will now go unreported because of the threat of deportation?

“Since the election, our immigrant communities have been literally petrified,” Saidi said. “We don’t want a situation where immigrants are afraid to call the police.”

For Saidi, a naturalized American citizen who was born in Iran, this issue is deeply personal.

“That’s why I became involved in immigration law,” he said. “There’s a real need for us all to work together.”

Cowboy Don’s plan has been to vilify immigrants, but his Twitter rants and the travel ban have only spurred a mobilization to push back against his anti-immigration administration.

“Immigrants in California are a force to be reckoned with,” Saidi said. “For too long our voices have been stifled in local government. We need to make sure our government officials in Contra Costa County are held accountable and they do the right thing.

“And if they don’t do the right thing, we want to make sure that they’re on record saying that they stand with these racist policies.”

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