
Letters to the Editor

Editorial was misinformed

To the editor:

Your editorial of Nov. 18 ("Enforce all our laws") is as disappointing as it is uninformed. As this is a complex issue, and Oberlin a town dedicated to education, we ask for your patience to explain why the residents of Oberlin should support the resolution soon to come before city council.

We begin with a reality: the immigration system in this country is utterly broken, yet Congress has for years refused to take meaningful steps to address the true nature of the issue. By all estimates, there are some 12 million undocumented migrants in the country, the vast majority drawn in over decades and decades by labor markets in the United States which cannot find workers to fill (mostly) low skilled jobs and by promises of a better life for their families. Historically, the country has turned a blind eye to such immigration when jobs needed to be filled and much more exclusionary when times were hard. The aggressive detention raids by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) bureau which we have seen over the past few months, raids which round up a few workers at local restaurants or meat packing firms are characteristic of moments of downturn. We all know that they will not, and cannot, resolve the problem, but they do create havoc in local communities and individual lives.

Because legislators at the federal level have refused to update the immigration system, creating the very "anarchy" that your editorial fears, cities and states have stepped into the breach, passing, in 2007 alone, more than 1,400 pieces of legislation on the issue, much of it targeting undocumented workers in a highly punitive fashion. But what your readers need to know is that local, state, and national law enforcement organizations have steadfastly opposed such laws, particularly those which would require local, county and state police to cooperate with ICE agents engaged in deportation raids or to collect data on residents' immigration status. The resolution currently before the city council of Oberlin is therefore fully consistent with the outlook of hundreds and hundreds of police departments from around the United States.

Why is cooperation with ICE a concern for these law enforcement officials? Most worry that by cooperating with ICE, they would seriously compromise their ability to protect the public safety of their residents. Beginning in the 1980s, police agencies across the country began to employ a policing strategy known as "community oriented policing" which places a significant burden on the ability of the police to develop trust between themselves and community residents. For communities with immigrant populations, building trust means getting immigrants to know that if they are victimized by crime or if they witness a crime, they can approach the police and not fear immigration-related consequences. Reports indicate that community oriented policing practices helped lead to a 57 percent drop in violent crime between 1993 and 2005. This is why, for example, the International Association of Chiefs of Police argued (Wall Street Journal, Feb. 2, 2006) that they were fundamentally concerned that "state and local enforcement involvement in immigration can have a chilling effect on the relationship with the immigration community in their jurisdiction."

Officials from dozens and dozens of law enforcement agencies at local and state levels around the country have uniformly suggested that they can best protect public safety by removing themselves from the function of policing immigration status. In fact, the example that your editorial provides ("perhaps that illegal immigrant is in town to make contact with a drug dealer for a Colombian drug cartel...") points precisely to what the police chiefs worry about when they take on the task of tracking the immigration status of their town's residents or visitors. Would you have the Oberlin police stop /all/ Hispanics who come into Oberlin on the assumption that they are probably working with the Colombian drug cartels? That is racial profiling, pure and simple, and obnoxious on its face as it assumes that people who look "different" are up to no good and should be asked what they are doing here. And why do you assume that the police would be unable to pursue drug dealers fully if they didn't know the immigration status of a suspect?

Oberlin has long been proud of its diversity, and has for more than 150 years defended the basic claims to the full humanity of all who live and visit our city. The resolution which will soon come before city council not only continues that tradition, but also acts in the best interests of public safety and community security, and we urge its adoption.

**Mark Fahringer
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Oberlin**