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Sheriff's Office ICE collaboration comes under fire at public forum

BY SAM MORGEN smorgen@bakersfield.com 21 hrs ago

In this file photo, Kern County Sheriff's deputies are posted at the entrance to the Central Receiving Facility's underground garage in downtown Bakersfield.

Henry A. Barrios / The Californian

Local advocacy groups and private citizens criticized collaboration between the Kern County Sheriff's Office and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency known as ICE during a public hearing at the Board of Supervisors Tuesday morning.

After state legislators passed the TRUTH Act in September of 2016, all counties that provide information to ICE are required to hold a public forum at some point during the year.

This was the first such meeting that has been held in Kern County.

As part of the meeting, the Sheriff's Office provided a bare-bones PowerPoint presentation followed by a nearly hour-and-a-half public comment period in which county residents, activists and legal experts mostly opposed the county's policy of providing certain pieces of information about undocumented immigrants to ICE agents.

The ICE agents then use that information to arrest and detain those who come out of Sheriff's Office detention facilities without proper immigration documentation.

"In some ways this forum is an opportunity," said Jordan Wells, an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer based in Bakersfield. "It's an opportunity to really understand the inner workings of how the Sheriff's Department participates in immigration enforcement and also how it abstains from immigration enforcement."

In 2017, ICE made 622 requests to be notified of the release of detainees from Kern County detention facilities, according to the Sheriff's Office. Of those requests, 610 were for Hispanic individuals, and 587 were male. The average age was 33.

ICE arrested 486 people that were released from detention facilities, the Sheriff's Office said.

The Sheriff's Office did not provide any demographic information on those arrested.

According to the ACLU, only nine other counties in the United States provided more removals to ICE through its Secure Communities Removals program than Kern County in 2018.

"When we see the numbers of 600-plus people that were turned over to ICE in 2017, these are not numbers, these are human beings," Dolores Huerta said at the meeting. "Of those 600 or so, we wonder how many of them that were deported really merited that deportation."

Although supervisors were not required to do anything or respond to anything said at the forum by the TRUTH Act, many who attended the meeting urged supervisors to change law enforcement policies to prohibit any cooperation with ICE.

Sheriff Donny Youngblood, who did not attend the meeting, came under intense criticism by speakers during the meeting, who objected to the Sheriff's Office's policies of providing ICE with any information.

"Clearly it has been demonstrated today that our sheriff is out of control," said retired pastor Chuck Shawver.

He added that he would have voted for the 1 percent sales tax increase proposed for county voters, but he disapproved so heavily of the leadership at the Sheriff's Office.

At the close of the hearing, the supervisors provided little comment.

Another hearing must be held by the county to comply with the TRUTH Act sometime next year.

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ICE arrests

622 The number of requests ICE made to the Kern County Sheriff's office about undocumented people held at the detention facility

610 Of those requests were for Hispanic individuals

486 Number of actual arrests ICE made based on those requests once the person was released from the detention facility