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Prince William is not the only local county cracking down on illegal immigrants lately. Starting March 9, the Fairfax County Sheriff's Office began receiving access to a program called Secure Communities, which is administered by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Fairfax County is the first county in the Washington metropolitan area, and the first in Virginia, to participate in the program. Secure Communities will allow county deputies to automatically access federal criminal history and biometrics-based immigration records of detainees in the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center and other county sites. The program is designed to help the county identify criminal illegal immigrants and begin the deportation process without requiring the expenditure of additional funds or manpower.

In comparison to Prince William County, some consider Fairfax County to be soft on illegal immigrants. However, Fairfax's recent partnership with ICE through Secure Communities demonstrates that the county is now taking the lead on identifying and supporting the removal of undocumented immigrants who commit crimes. With the help of the Fairfax County Sheriff's Office, ICE will be able to evaluate each person's immigration status and then pursue appropriate enforcement proceedings.

Pro-immigrant advocates have voiced concerns in the past with deputizing local law enforcement agencies to enforce immigration laws. They've feared that doing so would discourage victims and witnesses from coming forward to report crime because of their concern that they themselves would be questioned about their immigration status. The Secure Communities program has received little criticism to date. This could be because deputies will only be screening people who have already been arrested.

Fairfax County Sheriff Stan Barry estimates that of the 27,000 people who were housed in the Fairfax jail last year, 4,300 were suspected of being in the U.S. illegally. The Mecklenburg County Jail in Charlotte, North Carolina implemented the Secure Communities program last year. In less than 18 months, the jail has placed 2,839 people into deportation proceedings.

I don't believe anyone questions whether counties that surround large metropolitan areas, as Prince William, Fairfax and Mecklenburg do, are home to a great number of illegal immigrants. And few would argue against a program like Secure Communities. However, criminal detainees represent only a minor portion of the current illegal immigrant problem.

The real question is: Do we have the resources to deport the vast majority of the estimated nearly 12 million illegal immigrants living within our borders? Or is there a better, less expensive alternative?

Twelve million illegal immigrants represent a whopping four percent of the total U.S. population. In September 2007, ICE officials told Congress and the New York Times that

it would cost nearly \$100 billion dollars to deport all of these people. This figure doesn't even include the costs of finding the illegal immigrants, nor the court costs associated with trying them. In comparison, the entire 2009 DHS annual budget is about \$50.5 billion—and DHS has to do things other than just deporting undocumented immigrants, like protecting our nation from terrorism.

In 2008, on a budget of \$46.4 billion, ICE arrested and deported approximately 350,000 illegal immigrants, more than ever before in one year. Yet, that's less than four percent of the total number of illegal immigrants.

Most Americans agree that we need some kind of immigration reform. What form that takes is the center of controversy for critics on either side of the issue. Some would like to see the current administration focus more resources on detecting and deporting our nation's illegal immigrants.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are those like the Center for American Progress, which issued a report in 2005 arguing that a massive national deportation program for illegal immigrants would be unrealistic and would cost \$206 billion. Most of the heat of the debate, however, has cooled down in recent months due to citizens and politicians shifting their focus to the dire economic situation. By necessity, most people are now more concerned about whether or not they will be able to keep their homes or put food on the table than the legal status of their neighbors. In keeping with the current climate, lately Prince William has taken the teeth out of its effort to battle illegal immigration.

Nationally, 2009 has seen comprehensive national immigration reform take a backseat to emergency economic measures. This leaves local governments with the responsibility of dealing with what should be federal issues. Even with limited resources, Secure Communities offers local governments, such as Prince William and Fairfax Counties, a cost-effective means to remove illegal immigrants who commit crimes.

In these difficult economic times, local citizens may applaud less controversial measures such as Secure Communities. However, given the sheer number of people who are in the U.S. without legal status, what our country must really address is the issue of comprehensive immigration reform. A portion of that reform could include identification, registration, payment of fines and a conditional status as a precursor to a more permanent form of status. Given the current economic conditions, the progress that will be made by a national debate on immigration reform may not be realized soon. The reality is that deporting millions of illegal immigrants is simply too expensive and not a realistic option. With the above in mind, it's time to at least begin our debate concerning solutions.

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