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Immigrant advocates call for investigation of Morristown police plan

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MORRISTOWN — The New Jersey Immigration Policy Network has called on Homeland Security Department Secretary Janet Napolitano to "investigate" Mayor Donald Cresitello's application for a program that would deputize local police officers to enforce immigration laws.

Shai Goldstein, executive director of the Newark-based NJIPN, which is made up of several organizations promoting immigrants' rights, sent a letter saying he is "deeply concerned" about the application for the program known as 287 (g), and that it would "impair the (police's) ability to investigate crimes within communities."

In a phone interview, he said Cresitello tries to have it both ways by supporting a pathway to citizenship at the federal level, but wanting to adopt 287 (g) at the local level.

"When he talks to me, it sounds like he's for comprehensive immigration reform," he said. "He's got to demonstrate that at a local level, starting by withdrawing his application."

In his letter to Napolitano, Goldstein wrote the program is problematic and lacks the support of law enforcement organizations.

"Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello's push to implement this program conflicts with recently published studies that criticize the program on various levels, including one from the General Accountability Office," Goldstein said. "These studies demonstrate that the program can lead to racial profiling, inhibits immigrant community members from developing relationships with local police departments, and propagates myths about undocumented immigrants and crime."

Cresitello said he's amazed that Goldstein would want to bring additional federal attention to his application.

"I appreciate the fact he would expect a cabinet officer to review my request," Cresitello said.

He further pointed out, "I don't run this program," adding it would be conducted by the police department.

He said by the time the program is implemented, if ever, "I might not be around."

While Cresitello said county jail space would no longer be required, a prerequisite that doomed his attempt last year, Homeland Security department spokesman Michael Keegan said there's no indication that that particular requirement has been removed.

The federal government is reviewing the 287 (g) program following a scathing report from the GAO last week.

Goldstein added that local law enforcement officials have publicly expressed concern about 287 (g) and indicated they should not be enforcing immigration laws, which is done by federal authorities.

When issues of "status" is focused on, and not evidence of actual crimes, it can threaten public safety, Goldstein said .

Diana Mejia, who runs the local immigrant resource group Wind of the Spirit, said "287 (g) programs serve to create divisions in communities and lead to suspicion of immigrant neighbors. Rather than targeting immigrants for arrest, we should focus on public safety through creating welcoming and supportive communities."