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Morristown's Incendiary Mayor

The one thing you can say for certain about the controversy over day laborers is that it incites people to the boiling point. That is certainly true in Morristown, where the mayor, instead of trying to calm tempers, seems to be doing everything he can to turn up the heat.

With his plan to deputize a sixth of the town's police force as federal immigration agents, Mayor Donald Cresitello acknowledges that he would like to drive the day laborers, most of them Hispanic, out of town. He says that he will respect their civil liberties. But his intemperate language and reckless claims disparaging the day laborers and their supporters seem almost calculated to inflame already angry residents.

At a recent Town Council meeting jammed with boisterous onlookers, Mr. Cresitello described thousands of immigrants as "criminals," and put the blame for Morristown's relatively high crime rate on the estimated 200 day laborers who each morning line up near the train station, looking for work.

The mayor has also said that local ministers who have supported the immigrants had done nothing "significant" to address the problem. He delights in recounting incident after incident in which he says young immigrants were found urinating on residents' lawns and passed out in their backyards.

Under the mayor's plan, the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency would train 10 of the town's 58 police officers as deputy agents, which would give them the authority to begin the deportation process against illegal immigrants picked up for various offenses.

Federal immigration officials have so far deputized officers of about a dozen state and county agencies, mostly sheriff's departments. This makes sense because sheriffs run the jails and therefore need to check incoming inmates to see if they are in the country legally. But Washington is rightly leery of deputizing local police who might be encouraged to exert that authority in a heavy-handed manner.

Furthermore, Morristown's own police chief, Peter Demnitz, has been cool to the mayor's plan; he thinks it could discourage immigrants from reporting crimes against them. There have been numerous reports of day laborers who have been held up shortly after receiving their day's pay in cash, and some contractors are suspected of having cheated the workers of some of their earnings.

At this point, Mayor Cresitello should lower his voice and pursue a constructive approach. An essential first step would be to set up a hiring site, with toilets, where day laborers looking for work could gather and contractors could hire them. Officials at the site would monitor and register both workers and

contractors, to discourage worker disorderliness and deter unscrupulous contractors. This could go a long way towards defusing the issue.

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