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Two N.J. mayors, two immigration views

Morristown's head thinks cops should be deputized; Hightstown's disagrees

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GANNETT NEWS SERVICE**

WASHINGTON -- Two New Jersey mayors have staked out radically different positions on immigration, reflecting New Jersey's deepening debate on the issue following news that an illegal immigrant was the ringleader in the Aug. 4 triple slaying in Newark.

Hightstown's Bob Patten says everyone -- including illegal immigrants -- is welcome in his Central Jersey borough, and it's not the job of local police to enforce federal immigration statutes.

Morristown's Donald Cresitello, who says illegal immigrants have no place in his community, is the only municipal official in New Jersey to seek federal training for local officers so they could enforce immigration law.

Patten said Thursday the borough's inclusive attitude has helped promote harmony in the community of 5,300, where most of the 1,500 immigrants are from Ecuador. Additionally, he said, such a view is required under the U.S. Constitution's Fourth and 14th Amendments, which say "persons" and "people" -- not just U.S. citizens -- are entitled to equal protection under the law.

Hightstown would no longer be a "sanctuary" for all, regardless of legal status, if local police start enforcing immigration law, Patten said.

"We need to develop a sense of trust among all of our residents that the police are here to protect everybody," Patten said. "We celebrate the diversity. We are not interested whether they are documented or undocumented."

Patten said the borough's 14 police officers would comply with state Attorney General Anne Milgram's directive -- issued after the Newark killings -- requiring police in New Jersey to ask suspects picked up on felony and drunken-driven charges about their legal status and report illegal immigrants to the federal authorities.

But Hightstown's police won't ask suspects arrested for lesser offenses, Patten said, because that would discourage undocumented immigrants from reporting crimes committed against them.

Two years ago, the borough adopted a resolution calling on immigration agents to treat residents with respect in response to raids in which residents complained of boorish agents threatening women and children.

Since then, Patten and the borough's police have worked closely with immigrants and Hispanic business leaders. Patten said crime is down.

Even if an illegal immigrant commits a violent crime in Hightstown, "my sentiment would not change," Patten said. "I just look at people as people. There are people born and raised here who commit crimes."

Cresitello, who said Morristown isn't a "sanctuary" for illegal immigrants, asked the U.S. Immigration and Customs Service in March to train six of the town's police officers to enforce federal immigration statutes, for which he's caught flak from immigrant groups, U.S. Attorney Chris Christie and Gov. Jon Corzine.

Morristown is one of 60 state and local agencies waiting to hear from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement whether their officers will be selected to receive the training, which Congress authorized in 1996.

He said the idea behind the training is not to crack down on day laborers or immigrants picked up for minor offenses. Instead, it is to identify violent criminals who are also illegal immigrants and keep them locked up on immigration violations even if they are eligible for release on other crimes.

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Cresitello said the Newark killings could've been prevented if local police had known Jose Lachira Carranza's immigration status and prevented the Peruvian national from leaving jail. Authorities say he was out on bail when he killed three Delaware State University students and wounded a fourth.

Cresitello said he supports the failed U.S. Senate proposal to legalize undocumented immigrants, but doesn't want Congress to allow them to become citizens. He said he has to step in because Congress hasn't reformed immigration laws.

Morristown doesn't want to pass pro-immigrant laws as New Haven, Conn., has, or anti-immigrant laws, like Hazelton, Pa., has, Cresitello said. Local governments have no business regulating immigration, a federal matter, he said.

"Nobody's cracking down," he said. "You can twist and turn this any way you want. But the fact is 12 million people have crossed the borders."
