

# Convicted immigrants could be deported quickly if rearrested

By Robert Nolin

(FORT LAUDERDALE) SUN SENTINEL

DORAL — Local, state and federal law enforcement officials Tuesday announced Florida's official participation in a program designed to identify and deport criminal immigrants at the point of arrest.

The thrust of the program, called Secure Communities, is simple: Local police check arrestees' fingerprints with immigration records from the federal Department of Homeland Security to determine if that individual is an immigrant previously convicted of a crime. If so, they will be deported after serving their prison sentence.

"We'll identify the worst of the worst while they're still in jail," said Michael Meade, director of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Miami office. "It adds another layer to public safety."

Though welcomed by local law enforcement, the initiative also has its critics.

"There's a lot of concern about the whole program," said Susana Barciela, policy director for the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center in Miami. "It's really unknown how they use this wide latitude. We have more questions than answers."

The national program was started in 2008, and by last week, all 67 Florida counties were participating. Florida is the 24<sup>th</sup> state to join the program. It should be nationwide by 2013.

The initiative is in no way connected to a controversial Arizona state law which empowers police on the street to question anyone they suspect is in the country illegally, Meade said. The Secure Communities program was started years before Arizona lawmakers passed their measure, the ICE director said, and involves only an exchange of information, not action by an individual law enforcer.

Under the program, when a person is arrested, booked and fingerprinted, the information is automatically checked against DHS immigration records. If the

person is determined to have a criminal record, ICE agents will take action, focusing on those convicted of more serious offenses. Previously, an arrestee's prints were only sent to the FBI's criminal database to see if the individual had any prior warrants or criminal history.

ICE only consider a criminal immigrant as one already convicted, not simply facing charges.

That, Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner Gerald Bailey said, makes for a "tightly woven safety net."

But for Barciela, it violates a suspect's presumption of innocence. "If ICE really wanted to target criminals, they would check identification after conviction, not upon booking," she said.

In Florida, more than 1,800 criminal immigrants have been deported, ICE said.

There is also a possibility of immigrants becoming distrustful of local police if they feel interacting with an officer could get them or a family member deported.