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Texas lawmakers discuss increasing border security

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A Texas Department of Safety Trooper patrols on the Rio Grand along the U.S.-Mexico border, Thursday, July 24, 2014, in Mission, Texas. Texas is spending \$1.3 million a week for a bigger DPS presence along the border. (AP Photo/Eric Gay, Pool)

TEXAS (KXAN) — At the State Capitol Texas lawmakers met to discuss heightening border security. Lawmakers look to see if the State could play a greater role in enforcing immigration.

In 2014, the Obama Administration changed the policy of “secure communities” to the “priority enforcement program” or PEP. Under secure communities, local law enforcement had to detain people who committed Class C misdemeanors in order for immigration officials to begin the process to deport them. Under PEP, it takes a Class B misdemeanor or more to start that process. After that there are different levels of enforcement based on the crime.

Someone who comes here illegally is booked into jail just like everyone else. Federal Immigration officials then come pick them up for deportation. But, Texas sheriffs say changes in policy – is impacting their ability to keep people safe.

“We know that there are fewer people that are being detained by ICE when they commit crimes,” said Bexar County Sheriff Susan Pamerleau. She says she sees people in the country illegally bond out of jail for drinking and driving only to commit worse crimes. Before the Obama Administration changed immigration policy in 2014, she says those people would have been deported.

“It is supposed to target the most serious of criminals,” said Travis County Immigration Attorney Jacqueline Watson. She says the goal of the policy is to keep non-violent offenders from being deported. She says there isn’t time or resources to deport everyone here illegally because the Federal immigration court system is overwhelmed. In fact, She has cases waiting to see a judge – in 2019.

“The local law enforcement position to be able to take care of the problems. It has to be addressed by Congress and it just has not been,” said Watson.

This committee was formed to look into state solutions for immigration problems. Those solutions, however, are in short supply. The Federal Government charges people with immigration crimes. The State of Texas does not.

Here in Travis County, the Sheriff Department says before the policy change under “secure communities” – they held around 200 ICE detainees a day. Since November 2014, when the change was made to the “Priority Enforcement Program” – they now hold around 140 any given day.

During the hearing the Center for Immigration Studies said two million illegal immigrants have crossed the border into the U.S. and committed crimes. One million of those who commit crimes remain at large. Half of all immigration enforcement happens in Texas, according to the center's immigration numbers.

Several Democratic Senators disputed those numbers from the Center for Immigration Studies.

Contrary to the Center's immigration data, the Texas Tribune reported undocumented immigrants commit fewer crimes than U.S. citizens.

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