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In Bucks and Montco, new program will identify illegal aliens admitted to jails

By Michael Matza

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Illegal immigrants in Bucks and Montgomery Counties will face tough scrutiny under a federal program launched this week that uses enhanced technology and better sharing of fingerprint information among local, state and federal authorities to identify and ultimately deport them.

The jurisdictions are the first in Pennsylvania to adopt the program, called "Secure Communities," and among the first dozen nationally to partner with the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement division (ICE). In addition to Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Texas are in the program, which checks the immigration status of every person booked into detention facilities.

Before the implementation of Secure Communities, people booked at local jails would have their fingerprints transmitted to state police, who electronically checked them against the FBI's database to obtain information about outstanding warrants and criminal history.

The new process simultaneously checks detainees' fingerprints against the full Homeland Security database, which includes immigration records that often contain fingerprints obtained upon entrance to the country.

People who enter on a visa and are fingerprinted sometimes overstay their visas and thus are here illegally.

If the individual's fingerprints match those of a non-U.S. citizen, the new process automatically notifies ICE to evaluate the case, the Homeland Security Department explained in a statement.

"It is ICE's plan to roll this out to all jurisdictions within the next 31/2 years," said ICE spokesman Mark Medvesky, adding that it was part of a strategic plan that began two years ago "to look for the most dangerous people and remove them first."

Manuel Portillo, director of Open Borders, an immigrant advocacy group with offices in Olney, had mixed feelings about the new program.

"Anybody would agree that security for the good of the people is a good thing. We all understand that," he said. "The question is to what extent the local authorities in any county begin to do the work of the federal government and what kind of environment it creates; whether it increases safety or increases risk for certain populations.

"If that were to happen," he said, "even legal immigrants would lose trust in those institutions and begin to shy away from them."

Summary offenses such as public drunkenness that are treated like traffic tickets may not always be checked, said Medvesky, "but in theory, any misdemeanor or felony would. Our goal is to get an answer from the FBI within four hours of the time the state police hits 'Send' " on a computer.

Harris Gubernick, Bucks County director of corrections, said the program had promise.

He cited a recent example in which a woman from Kyrgyzstan was arrested in Doylestown for being drunk and disorderly.

Although she was prepared to post bail on the drinking charge, a check of the FBI database found that she was wanted by ICE for an immigration violation. She never left custody and was turned over to ICE, he said.

"Is this [new program] the end-all? No. But it is a good example of interoperability between local, state and federal agencies," Gubernick said.

"No technology in itself is going to solve all the problems. Whatever information you get back really has to be scrubbed through a person to evaluate it."

Of about 790 prisoners held in maximum and minimum security in the Bucks County jail this week, said Gubernick, 26 are being held on ICE detainers.