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Connecticut immigrants, state officials bracing for threat of immigration raids

By REBECCA LURYE and SLADE RAND | HARTFORD COURANT | JUL 12, 2019 | 6:30 PM



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Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin speaks against anticipated immigration raids set to begin Sunday at a news conference in front of the federal building in Hartford on Friday afternoon. At right is U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal D-Conn., who introduced a bill that would carve out spaces safe from Immigration and Customs enforcement activities. (Patrick Raycraft / Hartford Courant)

Connecticut officials and the state's immigrant community are bracing for the threat of nationwide immigration raids that President Donald Trump has said will begin Sunday.

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While no Connecticut cities have been listed as potential targets for raids, officials and immigration groups warn the exact locations of the enforcement operation are unknown. In news conferences and rallies across the state Friday, they walked a line between decrying the Immigration and Customs Enforcement ramp-up, pledging to expand protections for immigrants and offering grim advice in the event mass deportation arrests come to this state.

“These raids are looming right now and are very predictable in major cities like Bridgeport or Hartford,” said U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. “They are likely to be more selective, less visible and dramatic, but ICE is out there under orders to do these arrests, and they’ve been doing them.”

Speaking in Bridgeport, Gov. Ned Lamont promoted a [state toolkit that helps families prepare for a scenario where they are separated from their children](#). The plan encourages parents to designate a standby guardian to prevent children from being placed in state care.

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And in Bridgeport and Hartford, Blumenthal announced a new bill to block immigration enforcement at sensitive sites like schools, hospitals, courthouses and places of worship. ICE policy already prohibits agents from acting in those places, but the rule frequently goes ignored, he said.

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Chris George, at center, executive director of Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services in New Haven, speaks out in Hartford on Friday afternoon against the anticipated ICE raids set to begin this Sunday. At left is Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT). (Patrick Raycraft / Hartford Courant)

He and his co-sponsors want to enshrine the agency's policy into law, and give it teeth against "an agency that may be out of control, with agents that may be rogue," Blumenthal said. The bill would ensure undocumented immigrants can access the most essential services — from bringing their children to school and practicing their faith to attending court dates and visiting a hospital to seek treatment or report domestic violence.

Bridgeport resident Edie Cassidy worried whether public parks would gain the same protection — she said her youth soccer league lost half its young athletes in the wake of stepped-up immigration activities.

Trump had threatened the raids weeks ago, sparking anxieties that only heightened Friday when he said the mass deportation arrests would begin Sunday.

"It starts on Sunday and they're going to take people out and they're going to bring them back to their countries or they're going to take criminals out, put them in prison, or put them in prison in the countries they came from," he said. "We are focused on criminals as much as we can before we do anything else."

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Four years ago, Edna Ornelas-Ubaldo's father was picked up by ICE at a courthouse in Bridgeport. He was attending his final probationary hearing for charges related to a car crash. Despite his otherwise clean record, he was deported to Mexico.

Today, Ornelas-Ubaldo works with Make the Road CT, an immigrant support group, to help other undocumented residents engage in their communities and access legal services.

"Right now I just got the chills with all the stories being shared," she said Friday. "It's like I feel the fear and the sadness in the community. People don't want to come out, they don't want to talk to anyone, they just stop doing their daily activities because they're so scared to just accidentally get picked up. They're so cautious and it's just scary."

Ahead of the planned raids, officials and activists encouraged undocumented residents to educate themselves on their rights and, if they haven't done so already, consult an attorney about gaining legal status.

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Dana Bucin, an immigration attorney with Murtha Cullina in Hartford, said undocumented immigrants must resist the urge to retreat deeper into hiding. Now is the time not to panic, but to find out what legal remedies they have to remain in the country.

"I would love nothing more than to be able to help these people legalize, and come out of the shadows," she said. "To not be victims anymore, and just be people with legal status and be left alone.

Bucin added that the country's immigration crisis will be solved by adding more immigration judges, giving them more discretion in how they handle cases, and creating

more legal avenues for immigrants to live and work in the U.S.

Mass arrests simply stress an already clogged system, she said.

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“Who is to judge? The court, not us. Therefore let’s give the courts the resources they need to properly screen these cases under the law,” Bucin said. “Raids really don’t help, it just terrorizes communities with no additional resources.”

Raids have been conducted regularly in Connecticut since 2003, often producing hundreds of arrests. And regular ICE enforcement has contributed to 691 new deportation proceedings in Connecticut this year, as of June, according to Syracuse University’s TRAC research center.

Ninety-five percent of those cases involve immigration charges, not criminal ones, according to TRAC. And for those with a valid defense against deportation, the process is lengthy. Connecticut has an immigration court backlog of 6,250 cases, and an average wait of a year and a half, TRAC shows.

It is slightly unusual to target families, as opposed to immigrants with criminal histories, but it’s not unprecedented. The Obama and Trump administrations have targeted families in previous operations.

But the latest effort has taken on a sharp political tone, with the state’s Democratic elected officials ripping Trump for the stepped-up enforcement, saying it’s more evidence of his animus toward immigrants.

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“This is not America,” Lamont said Friday. “These are not our values. Mass deportation is the opposite of what America is all about.”

These are not our values. Mass deportation is the opposite of what America is all about.

— GOV. NED LAMONT

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Alok Bhatt, an immigrant rights activist, is pushing for a more drastic measure than simply carving out safe spaces. He's part of a push to defund and dismantle ICE on the grounds that the agency's mission and actions represent "systemic violence."

"We're not fearful," Bhatt said. "We are strong. When law enforcement doesn't protect us, we organize to protect ourselves."

For Bhatt, community defense coordinator for the Connecticut Immigrant Rights Alliance, a fresh round of raids are part of a larger failure to address immigration, along with the backlog of cases, increased detention of asylum seekers and juveniles, and poor conditions in overcrowded detention centers.

Blumenthal said he and Bhatt don't agree on the elimination of ICE, but he said the agency should be "radically transformed" and laws changed.

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“The point is the present system is broken,” Blumenthal said.

State Attorney General William Tong and Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz also attacked Trump Friday for attempting to add a question about citizenship to the 2020 census. He backed down from that effort on Thursday, but “the damage is done,” Bysiewicz said.

Experts have said a citizenship question could drive down undocumented immigrant participation in the census, ultimately undercounting communities with higher populations of Democrats and people of color.

“From the moment he announced his candidacy, the president has pursued a policy of cruelty and has done everything he can to instill fear and chaos into our communities,” Tong said. “His campaign of fear is intended to weaken our communities and defeat the rule of law. The Attorney General’s Office will keep fighting against these cruel and inhumane policies, to keep families together, and to ensure that every person is counted.”

Information from The Associated Press is included in this report.

Rebecca Lurye can be reached at rlurye@courant.com.

Rebecca Lurye

CONTACT



Rebecca is a business reporter covering stories of innovation and entrepreneurship across the state. She joined the Courant’s breaking news desk in January 2017 after spending three years covering cops and courts and education for the Island Packet in Hilton Head Island, S.C. She earned a journalism degree from the University of Maryland in 2013.

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