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JUSTICE DEPARTMENT LINKS FEDERAL FUNDS TO IMMIGRATION COOPERATION

Albuquerque, Baltimore, San Bernardino and Stockton told they can't participate unless they help with immigration enforcement

By Associated Press
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ALBUQUERQUE – The Justice Department told four cities that they wouldn't be eligible for a federal program to combat drug trafficking and gang crime unless they cooperate with immigration agents.

Albuquerque, Baltimore, and Stockton and San Bernardino in California had expressed interest in the Justice Department's Public Safety Partnership, which provides money and enlists federal agents, analysts and technology to help communities find solutions to crime.

On Thursday, the Justice Department sent letters to the cities saying they must give federal immigration authorities access to jails and notify agents before releasing inmates wanted on immigration violations to be eligible for the federal program.

"By taking simple, common-sense considerations into account, we are encouraging every jurisdiction in this country to cooperate with federal law enforcement," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a statement that accompanied the letters. "That will ultimately make all of us safer – especially law enforcement on our streets."

The statement indicated the conditions would apply to any municipality seeking to participate in the program, not just the four cities.

The threat marks Mr. Sessions' latest effort to force local authorities to work with federal agents to detain and deport people living in the country illegally as part of a push to reduce crime he believes is linked to illegal immigration. The attorney general has pledged to withhold federal money from cities that don't cooperate, similar to how previous administrations have held back highway funds during debates over the speed limit and drinking age.

But it wasn't immediately clear to the cities why they were targeted.

In a letter to Mr. Sessions, Republican Albuquerque Mayor Richard Berry denied that New Mexico's largest city is a sanctuary for immigrants living in the country illegally and said he has been trying to work with immigration authorities since taking office in 2009.

Peter Simonson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union in New Mexico, called the demands "a bullying tactic."

Another concern raised by cities is that police who patrol the streets book suspects into jails run by county or state authorities over which they have no control. The Justice

Department's letters focus on giving federal immigration agents access to such detention facilities.

"The city of San Bernardino has never taken any formal act to declare itself a sanctuary city," Police Chief Jarrod Burguan said. "Our policies have been very, very consistent over the years."

In the four letters, the Justice Department asked the prospective cities' police departments to show proof of their compliance by Aug. 18.

The Justice Department in June tapped 12 cities to receive aid through the Public Safety Partnership, and officials said the four cities targeted Thursday had expressed interest in the next chance at participating. Cities were chosen based on higher-than-average rates of violence and willingness to receive the help and training.

Cities that want to be involved going forward will have to show they allow unfettered communication between police and federal immigration authorities, give agents access to jails to question immigrants, and provide agents with 48 hours of notice when someone in the country illegally is about to be released.

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