

Customs raids spur training on rights Advocacy groups teach immigrants to protect selves

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In living rooms, laundromats, and community centers across Massachusetts, immigrant-rights groups are running an underground campaign to teach illegal immigrants to protect themselves from federal agents. Their instructions to the immigrants: Keep their lips sealed and doors shut unless authorities have a warrant.

The grass-roots training sessions, coming in response to recent federal raids through immigrant enclaves from Nantucket to Boston to Springfield, have ignited controversy on all sides.

Federal customs officials criticize the nonprofit groups for aiding anyone in this country illegally and say that agents generally target criminals. But the advocacy groups, worried that the raids are more widespread, say that even illegal immigrants have rights under the Constitution.

"We understand trying to remove violent people," said Maria Elena Letona, executive director of Centro Presente, a Cambridge-based nonprofit that aids immigrants. "But in doing so, you end up terrorizing entire communities."

One steamy night last week in Springfield, a handful of immigrants here illegally from Mexico and Honduras gathered in the sparse kitchen of a tiny apartment. They sat on nylon folding chairs facing a laptop computer that Joel Rodriguez, a trainer for the Alliance to Develop Power, had placed at the edge of the sink.

Their faces tense, they watched a DVD in Spanish that simulated encounters between immigrants and federal officials and police. In one scene, two men wearing jackets emblazoned with "police" and "ICE" pounded on the door, shattering a couple's morning coffee.

The couple froze. Through the closed door, the father asked to see the warrant, which the agent slipped underneath the door. After reading the warrant, the father returned it, saying it did not list his name. Rebuffed, the agents left.

After the video, Rodriguez told the immigrants that they should not lie or carry false documents, or run away.

"The best thing you can do is stay silent," or ask for a lawyer, he said.

Federal immigration officials and others say such training undermines federal immigration law, and worry that the advice could leak to criminals, as well. Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, which favors stricter controls on immigration, called the training "immoral."

"It troubles us tremendously," said Kelly Nantel, press secretary for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Washington, maintaining that the agency does not conduct random sweeps for illegal immigrants. "We would encourage organizations that are engaging in that kind of information distribution to stop."

Carol Rose, executive director of the ACLU of Massachusetts, said the training sessions are a form of constitutionally protected free speech designed to help families who are unaware of their legal options. Many unauthorized immigrants have applied for legal residency or asylum and are awaiting hearings, she said.

"Having those people know their rights isn't in any way going to give them any safety or comfort," said Rose, whose group has been doing the training for years.

National grass-roots immigrant groups called for increased training for immigrants at a conference in July, but many groups cannot afford it, said Lee Siu Hin, national coordinator of the National Immigrant Solidarity Network.

In Massachusetts, many nonprofits redoubled their efforts to train immigrants after last week's antigang raids in several Greater Boston cities led to conflicting reports about the detainees. Immigrant advocates said authorities picked up

some immigrants without criminal records. Federal officials said they arrested 36 gang members and associates.

Ali Noorani, executive director of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, or MIRA, said the groups support crackdowns on crime, but he was concerned that federal agents were using the raids to question anyone in sight. MIRA has been doing the training for years, but recently saw requests increase dramatically.

"What's happening right now is federal agents are banging on doors and barging into homes and saying I have a warrant for this person but I'm going to ask everybody everything," Noorani said. "So we're telling people, 'listen, you've not committed a criminal offense, so unless there is a warrant for you, the government has no reason to enter your home.' "

In coming weeks, groups including Centro Presente, the Chelsea Collaborative, Agencia Alpha, and MIRA are increasing training in Chelsea, Boston, Somerville, and other cities. Last week, dozens of advocates and immigrants flooded a church in East Boston and a gymnasium in Chelsea for PowerPoint presentations on immigrants' rights. On Saturday, Chelsea Collaborative handed packets to people as they lunched in restaurants and washed clothes in East Boston's Maverick Square.

The Alliance to Develop Power, a wide-ranging nonprofit in Springfield involved in affordable housing, union organization, and services for US citizens and immigrants, began training in June after a raid jarred the community.

According to the alliance, federal agents arrived to deport one illegal immigrant but also detained four others, including a couple from Mexico who were driving to pick up their son, who was with baby sitter.

In Springfield, the training sessions are intimate, invitation-only affairs held in immigrants' apartments, because people are afraid to gather in larger groups outside, said alliance director Caroline Murray.

At the end of each session, each trainee receives a packet of fliers outlining their rights and business-size cards to give to federal agents that explain why they decline to speak. The packets include an "emergency plan" that immigrants can use to arrange child care in case they are arrested.

Edith, a 26-year-old single mother from Mexico, invited the alliance to her Springfield apartment last week because she feared for her 3-month old daughter. The only person she trusts to care for her is 3,000 miles away in Los Angeles, which would be difficult to arrange if she is detained.

"Really, you think it's not going to happen to you," said Edith, who works for a laundry service and who did not want her full name used.

Jorge, 26, a construction worker from Honduras, said he would like to help police, but doubted that he would open the door for them today because he has too much to lose.

Eight years ago, he clung to the sides of trains to get to the Mexican border, paid \$1,500 for a boat ride across the Rio Grande, and then walked four nights to Houston. Eventually he made his way to Massachusetts and later paid \$6,000 to smuggle his mother here.

Now he has a wife, two children, and one on the way. He earns \$2,000 a month, 10 times what he made in Honduras.

"It's not that I don't trust [the police]," said Jorge. "If we didn't have the police here, this country would be like our countries. But sometimes the fear of what could happen to me takes over." ■