

Putnam Sheriff's Office joins federal illegal-immigration program

The Putnam County Sheriff's Office has become the first police agency in New York to join a federal program that uses fingerprints to identify suspected undocumented aliens and quickly determine their immigration status and if they have a criminal record.

The Secure Communities program of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, also known as ICE, lets local police tap into a federal database of fingerprints to determine a person's identity. It aims to combat the problem of those suspected of being illegal immigrants using fake names and other false information to thwart local police.

"Arrestees often use aliases and furnish other false biographical data, which can make it difficult to properly determine their immigration status," Sheriff Donald B. Smith said in a release.

State police this month arrested a Brewster man on felony forgery charges after determining he used aliases to avoid arrest on a 10-year-old rape warrant on Long Island. He was in the country illegally.

Under the Secure Communities program, the Sheriff's Office will use new technology to capture a suspected undocumented immigrant's fingerprints, which will be checked electronically against a federal biometric database. Federal officials will provide the Sheriff's Office with a device to check fingerprints and get results in a few hours. If fingerprints match, ICE will consider the person's immigration status, criminal history and severity of the alleged crime in determining whether to take the person into federal custody.

Ed Kowalski of 9/11 Families for a Secure America, an immigration-reform group, applauded the Sheriff's Office.

"Secure Communities could be the best crime-prevention program ever developed if all police jurisdictions in New York state participate. It's our organization's intent to work toward this goal in 2011," said Kowalski, who got involved in the group after his niece, Elizabeth Butler, 17, of North Salem, was raped and murdered in 2005 by her ex-

boyfriend, an illegal immigrant with a prior felony conviction for driving while intoxicated that made him subject to deportation.

But the program hasn't been without controversy. Some communities don't want to participate even though ICE officials have said it will be mandatory.

Udi Ofer, advocacy director at the New York chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, said the program will make communities less safe by making illegal residents more fearful of talking to police.

"This is a federal immigration program that weakens public safety, threatens people's constitutional rights and will diminish New York's reputation as a welcome place for immigrants," he said. "There have been many studies that have shown that programs like Secure Communities make communities and neighborhoods less safe by eroding the trust between the community and law enforcement agents."

Ofer said there is also concern that the program could lead to racial profiling.

The program will be in place in early 2011, Smith said.