



Lawmakers Consider Controversial Bills Targeting Immigrants

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As a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment sweeps the nation, Maine lawmakers will take up a series of bills targeting undocumented immigrants and refugees in the Judiciary Committee in Room 438 of the State House at 1 p.m. on Thursday, April 20. Front and center will be LD 366, sponsored by Rep. Larry Lockman (R-Amherst), which would compel towns and cities to require their local police to enforce immigration laws. The proposal comes in the wake of President Donald Trump's executive order that allows the federal Department of Homeland Security to deputize local law enforcement officials as immigration enforcement agents. Attorney General Jeff Sessions also announced last month that the Trump administration will block federal Justice Department grants to states and municipalities that restrict the sharing of information regarding the citizenship status of individuals between local and federal law enforcement.

While no town in Maine has a policy against cooperating with immigration authorities, Lockman's bill would prohibit towns from enacting ordinances that restrict enforcement of federal immigration law. It would also allow law enforcement to transport unauthorized immigrants to federal incarceration facilities. In an email, Lockman argued that Portland "handcuffed" its own police department due to the passage of a 2003 city ordinance that bars local police from inquiring into anyone's immigration status. The ordinance, however, still allows police to assist federal authorities when requested to do so.

"The purpose of the proposed legislation is to protect Maine people from violent criminal aliens who have settled in Maine over the past decade," wrote Lockman. "Any municipality, such as Portland, that harbors illegals will lose all state funding."

Under Trump's January executive order, non-citizens who commit even minor offenses are to be deported. Abdi Ali, a 28-year-old legal permanent resident originally from Somalia, is believed to be the first immigrant in Maine to be affected by the new order after he was arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents following a court appearance for an OUI charge last week, according to the Portland Press Herald. Ali reportedly came to the United States when he was 7 and has lived here for 20 years. According to news reports, Ali is being deported for a four-year-old drug possession charge for which he has already served jail time.

Lockman cited two instances of African immigrants committing crimes in Portland and, he said, “these aren’t the only such cases.”

“Sadly, Maine’s major media outlets aren’t interested in doing any investigative reporting on the incidence of noncitizens committing violent crimes against Maine people,” wrote Lockman. “We have a serious shortage of real journalists, and an over-abundance of propagandists who parrot the party-line of the progressives.”

Numerous studies, done by groups ranging from the National Bureau of Economic Research to the conservative Cato Institute, have concluded that immigrants in fact commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans.

American Civil Liberties Union of Maine has vowed to vigorously fight Lockman’s bill and has been holding workshops across the state to mobilize activists to testify against the proposed legislation. In its briefing, the ACLU argued that passage of LD 366 would lead to police racial profiling people perceived to be “foreign” and would break the trust between the immigrant community and police, making non-citizens less likely to report crimes or provide evidence. Furthermore, opponents say that local police aren’t trained to interpret complicated immigration laws.

“LD 366 will make immigrants feel less welcome in Maine,” said Oamshri Amarasingham, advocacy director of ACLU of Maine. “It will undermine the trust between local law enforcement and the communities they serve. And it will punish towns and cities if they choose not to participate in potentially unconstitutional behavior like unlawful detainment and racial profiling.”

Last month, Maine ACLU sent a letter to all of the sheriffs in the state and several police departments stating that local law enforcement departments are not obligated to follow Trump’s immigration orders and could face lawsuits if they do. The letter also noted that the orders don’t come with any extra funding to cover the added burden of immigration enforcement and the potential legal challenges that may arise.

Taking Aim at Refugee Resettlement Agencies

Lockman has also proposed two other bills that would attempt to block further refugee resettlement in Maine. LD 1099 would direct the Maine Attorney General to file a lawsuit against the federal government for requiring that refugees be provided with Medicaid coverage. The Judiciary Committee will also hear Lockman’s bill LD 847, which would make refugee resettlement agencies liable for acts of terrorism that refugees commit. The measure would revoke the tax-exempt status of resettlement agencies that “refuse to consult with state and local governments or that otherwise disregard the concerns of state and local governments.” Lockman did not respond to a request asking what “consult” or “concerns” would mean under the proposal.

A spokeswoman for Catholic Charities of Maine, which is responsible for refugee resettlement in the state, stated that the organization is still reviewing the bills.