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Essick promises solidarity with Latinos

SONOMA COUNTY » *Sheriff says minor offenses will not be reported to federal agents*

By **NASHELLY CHAVEZ**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Sonoma County deputies will not report undocumented immigrants to federal immigration agents for minor offenses or alerting authorities of a crime.

That was the message of reassurance Friday night from Sonoma County Sheriff Mark Essick at the Graton Resort & Casino, where several thousand Latino residents gathered for the casino's monthly Latin dance night.

Essick, who made his planned appearance on stage at about 10 p.m., said he wanted to make it clear to the crowd that his deputies will not ask anyone about their immigration status, nor alert U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents of victims who go to the Sheriff's Office to report a crime.

People found to be driving uninsured or without a license, stopped by his deputies for minor traffic infractions, or arrested for other petty crimes will also not be reported to federal agents. His deputies will not help conduct ICE raids in the county either.

"We want people in Latino communities to not be afraid to report things to police," Essick said in an interview early Friday. The message reflects

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ALVIN JORNADA / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Sonoma County Sheriff Mark Essick, right, and deputy Juan Valencia speak to the crowd Friday at the monthly Latin baile at Graton Resort & Casino.

"I think there's now a recognition by police chiefs, and some sheriffs … that the community is safer if you don't polarize and you don't isolate the immigrant community."

RICHARD COSHNEAR, Santa Rosa immigration attorney who was involved with the Committee for Immigrant Rights at the time of the lawsuit

SOLIDARITY

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Sheriff's Office's policy since at least 2017 and state law that limits how California police agencies cooperate with federal immigration authorities.

"We're not going to pull out a notebook and start asking them their immigration status," said Essick, a department veteran nearing his eighth month in office after winning election last year.

Greg Sarris, the tribal chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, invited Essick to speak at the casino after a meeting between the two men in March revealed the office could do a better job informing the public about how deputies cooperate with ICE, Essick said.

"Here's this guy that's really well connected, and he's saying, 'I haven't heard anything,'" Essick said of the meeting. "It gave me pause, to say 'Shoot, maybe we didn't do as good as a job as we thought we did."

The two agreed on Friday's concert, starring Mexican norteño musician Ramon Ayala, also known as "The King of the Accordion."

Essick's public gesture reflects an evolution for the Sheriff's Office, where deputies' collaboration with ICE has narrowed significantly within the past decade amid internal policy shifts, changes to state law and legal cases that clarified the role local law enforcement officers can play in immigration enforcement and detention, activists said.

The legal challenges include a 2011 settlement in a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Committee for Immigrant Rights of Sonoma County that accused the Sheriff's Office of unlawful detentions of suspected undocumented immigrants.

The suit, filed in 2008 during Sheriff Bill Cogbill's tenure, alleged Sonoma County deputies were stopping and detaining people based solely on their immigration status and booking them on immigration holds without listing a suspected violation of state law. Cogbill rejected the claims.

Three years later, the Sheriff's Office, helmed then by Steve Freitas, agreed to minimize its collaboration in federal enforcement actions targeting otherwise law-abiding undocumented immigrants and provide inmates with clearer information about why they were arrested, among other changes, as a result of the settlement.

"They were going around in 2006 and arresting young Latino men with no criminal charges, and just parking them in the jail so ICE could come get them," said Richard Coshnear, a Santa Rosa immigration attorney who was involved with the Committee for Immigrant Rights at the time of the lawsuit. "I think there's now a recognition by police chiefs, and some sheriffs … that the community is safer if you don't polarize and you don't isolate the immigrant community."

State laws enacted since 2014 have strengthened protections for some undocumented immigrants that come in contact with authorities. They include limits that bar agencies from keeping someone solely because of their immigration status and restrict when jails can notify ICE of an inmate's release to only the most serious cases, such as those previously convicted of violent crimes.

Policy changes made at the Sheriff's Office in mid-2017 have in turn resulted in fewer notices about jail inmate release dates to ICE officials, who rely on the alerts to detain people they suspect are in the country illegally as they leave the jail, data released by the Sheriff's Office last month showed.

For Ana Salgado, a community activist, Essick's announcement shows he's willing to go beyond what's required by state law to show the local undocumented community that they have rights in Sonoma County, and that his deputies will honor those rights, she said.

Salgado also said it's the kind of outreach she and other Latino community members have asked the Sheriff's Office for since the death of Andy Lopez, a Santa Rosa teen shot by a sheriff's deputy in 2013. She credited Robert Sheriff Giordano for his outspoken defense of the county amid the 2017 fires, when he rebutted claims from the acting head of ICE that suggested an undocumented immigrant was responsible for the inferno.

"That means he's able and wanting to start making those connections with the community," Salgado said of Essick. "They are going to see that he is trying to get closer, and is seeking them out."

Sarris invited Essick to make the announcement because he "wanted to do something to help make peace in our community" in light of Lopez's death and White House immigration policies, he said in an emailed statement.

He hoped Essick's message would create a feeling of safety, particularly among undocumented resident, he added.

"This event will be historic in that the sheriff will do what few other sheriffs in this state have done — which is to let his Latino constituents know that he's indeed here to serve and protect them," Sarris said.

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