

# City to offer ID for illegal aliens

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NEW HAVEN - Hundreds of undocumented Latino immigrants living in New Haven will be offered city-issued ID cards under a new program announced Monday.

Mayor John DeStefano Jr. wants to give illegal immigrants a legitimate form of ID so they can open bank accounts, prove their identity to police and access social services.

"Let's be real about why this is happening first of all," said the mayor, who is also a gubernatorial candidate, during a bilingual press conference in City Hall. "The failure of the federal government to recognize and embrace thousands and thousands of hard-working residents, is subjecting those people and their families to abuse and exploitation," he said.

New Haven is home to some 25,000 Latinos, almost half of which are undocumented immigrants from Central and South America.

"All of these people are hard-working, decent members of our society on which we depend everyday," DeStefano said. "We can do better by them and we have to make up some of it as we go along."

The news of the ID program incensed the leader of a Connecticut anti-immigrant group.

"Does anybody in New Haven understand that they are breaking the immigration law?" said Elise Marciano, Danbury chapter president of the Connecticut Citizens for Immigration Control.

"You are not supposed to aid and abet illegal aliens," Marciano added. "They have no documents. They could give you any name. They could go and get 15 different ID cards with different names. How would you know?"

Immigrant-advocates say the population badly needs a form of ID but fear federal immigration officials could easily use the information to round up illegals living here peacefully.

"That was a concern, so we consulted the Yale Law School on the legality of doing this," said Kica Matos, executive director of JUNTA for Progressive Action, which hatched the program. "These are uncharted waters."

The new program, dubbed Hablamos Espanol, literally, We Speak Spanish, is a four-pronged approach aimed at making City Hall more user-friendly to Spanish speakers.

The ID cards is one aspect, and another is urging local banks to allow immigrants to open accounts without required Social Security numbers.

Without accounts, immigrants are often forced to carry huge sums of cash and can become victims of robbery, said Police Chief Francisco Ortiz Jr. Without IDs, they are remiss to report the crime to police, he said.

"A lot of folks can't get a legitimate form of ID," Ortiz said. "They need some credentials and we can help them. That goes a long way for the city."

The IDs would resemble a driver's license, with a photo, name, address, date of birth, height, weight and eye color, Ortiz said. Immigrants who could prove they live here - by showing a utility bill or mail sent to them - would be eligible for the card, he said.

Matos acknowledged the card may have little practical value if the community does not recognize it.

"Certainly, there is no obligation by anyone to accept the municipal ID, but I hope the idea will have some teeth in it," she said.

DeStefano has dismissed calls by anti-immigrant groups to crack down on illegals living in New Haven, and on Monday, Ortiz reiterated the administration's position.

"We are going to lead the discussion and policy-making on how police will enforce immigration, I promise you that," Ortiz said.

Hablamos Espanol also provides new Spanish versions of city documents previously in English only, including marriage, birth and death certificates.

Latino politicians reached later Monday applauded the new bilingual forms, but said far more needs to be done, including hiring more bilingual city workers.

"I commend the mayor on finally realizing this is a legitimate issue and needs to be addressed, but this is only a first step," said Board of Aldermen President Jorge Perez, D-5, who represents a neighborhood in the Hill.

State Rep. Juan Candelaria, D-New Haven, agreed with Perez.

"Hopefully, we'll be able to not only translate documents but have people to help the Hispanic community in explaining the documents," Candelaria said.

"But, it happened now. I have to commend the mayor on that."

Few city departments have bilingual workers, meaning the few Spanish-speaking staffers are called on to translate for constituents at a moment's notice.

"It would certainly be a goal to have bilingual capacity for every department, and we certainly don't have that now," said Human Resources Director Tina Burgette. "We have offered Spanish language classes to city employees."