

IMMIGRANTS ARRESTED AS PART OF HOMELAND SECURITY PILOT PROGRAM

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HARTFORD, Conn. -- Federal agents have begun arresting illegal immigrants in Connecticut as soon as they are ordered deported, rather than allowing them to remain free while they appeal.

The policy shift is a pilot program that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security is considering expanding nationwide to reduce the number of illegal aliens who flee after being ordered out of the country.

"We're trying to make the judges' final decisions mean something more," said Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

But immigration attorneys say the policy will have the opposite effect, and will encourage immigrants to skip court hearings and take their chances on the run.

"It's going to have a chilling effect," said Hartford attorney Daniel Marcus, who recently had a client taken into custody.

Marcus and others complain that immigrants seeking political asylum or protection from torture will be detained alongside criminal aliens.

Under the pilot program, immigrants are detained as soon as a deportation order is issued. Bond hearings are held, and if immigrants cannot post bail, they are led from the court in handcuffs, attorneys say.

Nineteen Connecticut immigrants have been detained since the program began in early August, Bentley said.

A judge's deportation order is not final. Immigrants can appeal rulings to the Board of Immigration Appeals. Traditionally, an immigrant who has not committed a crime has been allowed to remain free as that process plays out.

The pilot program is scheduled to end Sept. 30. Officials plan to analyze the results and consider implementing it nationwide.

There are other options to consider. Officials in Alaska, Illinois and Florida have experimented with electronic monitoring bracelets to monitor immigrants.

Marshall Fitz, associate director of advocacy for the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said it is unfair to group illegal immigrants who have been convicted of crimes with those who have not.

"These people have not judged to be criminals," Fitz said. "This is a blanket policy."