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RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

Illegal immigrant housing program faces ax

Elaine Goodman

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✓ A federal program that has reimbursed the Washoe County Sheriff's Office millions of dollars for housing illegal immigrants in jail faces elimination this year, a justice department official said.

✓ The cut also would mean the loss of about \$1.5 million a year for the state prison system, which still is reeling from a 3 percent budget cut mandated by the governor this year.

✓ "We're budgeted pretty tight. There's really nothing we can take away to make up for the loss of the program," said Darrel Rexwinkel, assistant director for support services for the Nevada Department of Corrections.

Jails and prisons that receive the funding can spend the money however they wish. An inmate's stay must be 72 hours or longer to qualify.

Jurisdictions that receive the funding also can spend the money however they wish.

✓ "We've used it to buy sorely needed equipment," said Assistant Sheriff Jim Lopey.

✓ In 2002, the program paid the sheriff's office for 216 jail inmates whom the INS confirmed were here illegally. The program provided partial payment for another 601 inmates for whom the INS wasn't able to determine immigration status, according to the Department of Justice.

The jail booked about 23,300 inmates in 2002.

The program paid the Nevada Department of Corrections, either fully or in part, for 880 inmates in 2002. The prisons house about 13,500 inmates a year.

✓ The sheriff's office received \$890,000 through the program in 2002. Of that, \$112,000 will be used for wire mesh outside jail cell windows and beefed up fencing, improvements that gained importance after an inmate escaped out a window in August.

✓ The money will buy a \$4,000 walk-through metal detector and a \$5,000 device that checks non-invasively for metal concealed in a body cavity. Inmates returning from court will be scanned with the device to check for items such as guns, knives or hacksaw blades, said Assistant Sheriff Lee Bergevin.

✓ Another \$22,000 will help cover the county's share of a \$150,000 robot for the regional bomb squad.

Of the remainder, \$600,000 will go into the sheriff's budget to use for more general purposes.

✓ In past years, the funding has helped the sheriff's office pay for an armored van for the Special Weapons and Tactics team, a walk-in refrigerator for the crime lab, overtime costs and cost overruns for a new drunk tank.

★ The sheriff's office has been receiving the funding for about five years with reimbursement peaking in

<http://www.rgj.com/news/printstory.php?id=33456>

EXHIBIT D Senate Committee on Gov't Affairs

Date: 2-10-03 Page 1 of 2

2000 at \$1.3 million. A consultant hired to maximize the funding gets 22 percent of any amount above \$500,000, which worked out this year to \$85,500. ~~XXXXX~~

The state prisons have used the federal money for day-to-day operations rather than buying any special equipment, Rexwinkel said. He said elimination of the program would leave the system scrambling to find new revenue or ways to further pare its budget.

The cut might mean that more money would be taken from the state's general fund to run the prisons, Rexwinkel said.

Gov. Kenny Guinn's spokesman, Greg Bortolin, said the loss of \$1.5 million is small relative to the state's nearly \$2 billion budget.

"Any amount of money that we don't have would be an impact," Bortolin said.

The Bush administration has not requested funding in the next fiscal year for the program, called the state criminal alien assistance program or SCAAP, said Sheila Jerusalem, a spokeswoman for the federal Office of Justice Programs.

"They would like to basically reassess how the funds are used and put them more toward border security," Jerusalem said. "Why not catch them (illegal immigrants) before they get in?"

Jerusalem said the budget is not final and legislators still could try to reinstate the program.

Because jurisdictions aren't restricted on how they can spend the money, the funding isn't necessarily used for fighting crime, according to an Office of Justice Programs budget document provided by Jerusalem.

Border states, which saw the most benefit from the program, will be helped instead through an expanded border assistance initiative, the document said.

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