

Public Safety

# County by county, ICE faces a growing backlash

By [Justin Jovenal](#)

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Activists in Alexandria, Va., are pressing the sheriff to drop an agreement to detain migrants for ICE. The sheriff in Contra Costa County, Calif., canceled a similar contract in July, soon after at least 1,000 protesters marched on the local jail.

And at Philadelphia City Hall, organizers camped out for weeks beneath a banner that read “I.C.E. Get Out” before the city recently agreed to stop sharing real-time arrest information with immigration authorities.

With little leverage to counter the Trump administration’s aggressive immigration crackdown in a Republican-controlled Washington, immigrant advocates and grass-roots groups are mounting a furious backlash in local communities across the country.

They can’t stop deportations, but they hope to throw sand in the gears by targeting pressure points in the system: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement relies on local agencies to jail detainees who may be in the country illegally, notify ICE of their release and even help conduct immigration enforcement.

The protests have gained momentum alongside calls to abolish ICE, particularly as outrage spread over President Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy that separated some migrant children from their parents at the border.

While dismantling a major federal agency remains a long shot, the more modest local efforts have notched victories in at least a dozen communities. They include [Fairfax County, Va.](#), which dropped an ICE contract at its jail, and Hudson County, N.J., where officials this month announced a plan to take the same step.

*[\[Tensions over immigration heat up between Trump administration and Virginia's largest jurisdiction\]](#)*

Contra Costa County Supervisor John M. Gioia, who pushed to end his local jail's contract with ICE, said the issue has spurred more activism than virtually any other in two decades.

“We don't want to be part of Trump's policy of separating families and rounding up immigrants,” Gioia said.

The efforts dovetail with campaigns to kill ICE partnerships with universities and corporations. Professors and students at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore have protested a collaboration between the school and ICE to provide management and leadership training, while more than 300,000 people and 500 employees have signed a petition calling on Microsoft to stop providing cloud computing services to ICE.

But the campaigns have also stirred controversy. ICE and some community members say severing ties with immigration authorities makes communities less safe and note that the agreements and contracts bring millions of dollars to jurisdictions.

“They believe it's putting your thumb in the eye of the current administration,” Alexandria Sheriff Dana Lawhorne said of local groups trying to get him to cut ties with ICE. “That's politics. I will not play politics in my office when it comes to public safety.”

**Dependent on local jails**



Ingris Moran, lead organizer for Tenants and Workers United, poses in front of a mural outside the advocacy group's office in Alexandria, Va. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

Ingris Moran said fear rippled through Alexandria's Chirilagua neighborhood, which is home to many of the city's Latinos, as Trump began ramping up immigration enforcement in his administration's opening months. Large-scale work raids, roundups of immigrants near churches and other tactics spurred concern.

Moran said it became increasingly hard to reconcile a post-election statement the city issued about respecting undocumented immigrants with its long-standing agreements with ICE. Moran, who grew up in Chirilagua and whose parents came from El Salvador, is the lead organizer with the advocacy group Tenants and Workers United.

The sheriff was holding inmates for two days past their scheduled release if ICE suspected they were in the country illegally. The hold gave ICE time to decide whether to begin deportation proceedings. ICE also had a separate agreement to use bed space at the jail.

The latter agreement is part of a larger one with a number of federal agencies. They pay roughly \$7 million to the city each year to use a floor

of the jail. In 2017, Alexandria turned over 105 people to ICE, nearly double the number from the year before, according to the sheriff's office. In 2018 through August, it turned over 53 people.

“As long as elected officials have a voluntary agreement with ICE, our immigrant families will hide in the shadows and be in fear and not trust law enforcement,” Moran said.

Federal law allows ICE to negotiate agreements with local municipalities for the housing and care of its detainees. In 2016, ICE received about \$2.3 billion to house immigrants at facilities across the country, according to the Inspector General for the Department of Homeland Security.

Those types of arrangements — which ICE has with more than 190 local jails and detention facilities nationwide — are key to the agency's enforcement efforts. The bulk of the agency's roughly 42,000 detainees are held in local facilities.

The issue has stirred passions in Alexandria. A speaker at a City Council meeting in March accused ICE of being “unhinged” and tearing families apart. A council member said he received emails questioning the sheriff's integrity, and Lawhorne said he had been accused of ethnic cleansing in one Facebook post.

In July, Lawhorne announced that he would no longer hold immigrants for ICE past the end of their sentences and only for 16 hours in cases where the defendant receives bond. The latter provision was recently dropped to eight hours. The sheriff has also limited ICE to using two beds at the jail for temporary holds.

Moran called it a good “first step,” but she and advocates from the Legal Aid Justice Center and Grassroots Alexandria are still pushing for the sheriff to cut ties with ICE altogether. Lawhorne said that while he is sympathetic, he won't go there. He said many of the inmates he is holding for ICE are facing charges for violent offenses.

“I'm not going to ignore a lawful detainer filed by a federal agency and release someone back to the community who poses a threat,” Lawhorne said. He added by email: “They are asking me to have no interaction with

ICE whatsoever. Under that scenario, Alexandria could become a sanctuary city and be subjected to possible consequences.”

### **Nationwide protests**



Enrique Sandoval speaks after a July 2017 county commissioners meeting concerning a possible contract with ICE in Jerome, Idaho. (DREW NASH/AP)

ICE’s relationships with local governments have created similar flash points across the country. Debate has been vocal — and even raucous at times.

In Grand Rapids, Mich., protesters pushing to end a local contract with ICE shut down a county commissioners meeting in June by shouting “shame” at elected officials and chanting “ICE out of Kent County!” as officials hurried out of the room.

In Philadelphia, activists erected a tent city outside City Hall in early July to protest the city allowing ICE to access a police database. The protesters later attempted to hold a sit-in in the office of the mayor, who eventually met with them and agreed to drop the agreement.

“If I could abolish ICE, I would,” Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney (D) said in making the announcement. “But we can abolish this contract, and we are.”

In California, Contra Costa County’s jail was the scene of numerous protests before a large group turned up on June 30 to rally against Trump’s immigration policies and the local ICE contract.



About two weeks later, Sheriff David Livingston cited a range of reasons for dropping the contract, including the fact that protests and community tension had cast a shadow over the work his deputies were doing at the jail.

Gioia, the county supervisor, said the contract had eroded trust between the local government and the county's immigrants, who make up about a quarter of the population.

"The cost to our county outweighed the net revenue that the sheriff received," Gioia said.

But that was no small sum.

Contra Costa officials had to take \$2.4 million from reserves to fill the hole in the sheriff's budget left by the loss of the contract. Other municipalities, including Santa Ana, Calif., have had to scramble to make up for such losses when they canceled their contracts.

*[\[California's defiance of immigration law creates stark divides\]](#)*

ICE officials declined a request for an interview, but a spokesman pointed to a statement from former acting director Thomas Homan about a California sanctuary law that he said highlighted the perils of limiting cooperation with ICE.

Homan wrote that the law would "undermine public safety" and hinder ICE from performing its mission.

"ICE will have no choice but to conduct at-large arrests in local neighborhoods and at worksites, which will inevitably result in additional collateral arrests, instead of focusing on arrests at jails and prisons where transfers are safer for ICE officers and the community," Homan wrote.

In a separate statement about the cancellation of the Contra Costa contract, ICE officials said detainees would suffer since they would have to be placed at facilities farther from their families and immigration attorneys.

While some municipalities are severing ties with ICE, others have increased their cooperation. Late last year, Anne Arundel County in Maryland announced that it had reached an agreement with ICE to house about 130 detainees as part of a \$1.7 million annual contract.

The county also joined ICE's 287(g) program, which allows a local jail to screen inmates for immigration violations. Since Trump took office, 78 other jurisdictions have joined the 287(g) program, roughly tripling the number of participants.

Anne Arundel's moves were made in part to combat the MS-13 gang, which has made a local resurgence and draws a chunk of its membership from undocumented immigrants from Central America, county officials said.

The county's cooperation with ICE has sparked protests. Steuart Pittman, the Democratic nominee for county executive, has denounced both agreements in his race against Republican incumbent Steve Schuh.

Schuh's spokesman said the deal has allowed the county to turn an unused wing of the jail into a much-needed moneymaker. "That agreement has generated nearly \$3 million in revenue that has allowed us to increase compensation for our correctional officers," Owen McEvoy said in an email.