



Opinion

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Don't Use Racism to Fight Terrorism

The Portland Peaceful Response Coalition, a local anti-war organization, expressed strong backing for the Portland Police Department's decision to refuse to assist the federal call for ethnic profiling.

"We're very encouraged to see that our police department is not willing to trash our constitutional freedoms," said Candace Larson of the PPRC. "John Ashcroft may want an America without the Bill of Rights, but fortunately there seems to be some people in the Portland Police Department who understand that you don't fight terrorism with racism."

"You can use personnel and equipment just to go out and randomly interview people solely on immigration," said Andrew Kirkland, an assistant police chief.

Portland is the first police department to refuse to cooperate with the attorney general's request.

The PPRC thanks the city of Portland for resisting the attorney general's continued erosion of civil rights, especially the civil rights of immigrants, and encourages the city to continue to protect our civil rights from the encroachments of the FBI and other federal police agencies.

Racial Profiling or Good Police Work?

Police nationwide divided over whether to cooperate with federal interviews of Middle Eastern men

BY ROBERT TANNER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Police departments nationwide are breaking ranks over Justice Department efforts to interview 5,000 Middle Eastern men, with officers far beyond Oregon concerned about racial profiling. Others are astounded that their colleagues wouldn't cooperate with federal agents.

Local law enforcement balked at the University of Michigan, and in San Jose and San Mateo in California. There has also been some hesitation elsewhere.

Others scoff at the reservations. "That's not racial profiling, that's good investigative work," said Chief Michael Chitwood in Portland, Maine.

After the Sept. 11 hijackings, the federal government detained some 1,100 people in an attempt to track down terrorist networks and prevent future attacks.

Last month, the Justice Department announced plans to interview 5,000 young male foreigners from the Middle East and countries where terrorists are known to operate. Federal agents were told to work with local and state police to find people for questioning.

In Oregon, police in Portland and Corvallis — have refused to cooperate.

In Fremont, Calif., and Ann Arbor, Mich., police are accompanying federal agents when the interviews are requested or conducted, hoping to ensure that those questioned don't feel unduly pressured.

In Denver, the federal government is pursuing interviews on its own.

For the interviews, the federal government is taking different approaches in different parts of the country. Letters went out inviting people to the interviews in Detroit, while in Grand Rapids some agents have gone door-to-door trying to make contact.

"Whether this is racial profiling or not I suppose depends on your viewpoint," said Chief Craig Steckler in Fremont, home to the nation's largest Afghan-American community. "I personally don't think we have any terrorists living in Fremont, nor do I think we have people living in Fremont who know terrorists."

The FBI identified six local men to interview, and though Steckler said he's sure FBI agents are well-trained, he wants a local officer to be present, too. If federal officials aren't respectful, it could jeopardize local relationships, he said.

For San Mateo County Sheriff Don Horsley, the decision was clear: "We don't have any legal authority to question people. Unless they could articulate some suspicious activity, no, we wouldn't participate."

In Ann Arbor, "I'm reserving judgment on whether or not my cops will participate," Chief Dan Oates said. Instead, he's arranging a meeting between the federal agents and the local Arab-American community, hoping to ease fears and allow for interviews to go forward.

Other police are pursuing interviews sought by the FBI, and question the logic of those who refuse.

"I think the leaders of those agencies who decide not to assist should reassess what kind of career path they should take," said Baltimore Det. Gary McLhinney.

"Nothing that they've asked us to do constitutes a violation of any law," said Lt. Horace Frank with the Los Angeles Police Department. "No one is stopping every Arab or every Middle Easterner or detaining them."

The American Civil Liberties Union and some Arab-American groups have criticized the federal effort and applauded police departments that refused to cooperate.

"These interviews are inherently coercive," said Anthony Romero, the ACLU's executive director. "History will honor these departments and their leaders for their principles, professionalism and independence."

For the interviews, the federal government is taking different approaches in different parts of the country. Letters went out inviting people to the interviews in Detroit, while in Grand Rapids some agents have gone door-to-door trying to make contact.

"These people are not suspects," said Suellen Pierce, a spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office in Charlotte, N.C. "They are simply people we want to talk to because they might have helpful information."

In Portland, Maine, police last week began interviews with 22 men identified by the FBI — all of them with licenses to transport hazardous material, Chitwood said.

"It's all voluntary. We're not bringing anybody out from their house. Just knocking on their door, 'I'm detective so-and-so,'" Chitwood said. "I really have a tough time when people say racial profiling."

He and Frank in Los Angeles likened the interviews to any investigation of a crime: visit the community, talk to the people where the bank robbery occurred, ask people what they've seen and heard.

"Questioning or interviewing people of a certain age — yes, the people they're talking about are Middle Easterners — but it's males of a certain age who entered the country at a certain date, in a certain time frame," Frank said.

"The reasons we have those elements are because of what they found out about the hijackers. You have specific things. That's not racial profiling."



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