The following article appeared in the Houston Chronicle on November 13, 2013.

**County reauthorizes federal jail screenings**
By Kiah Collier

The Harris County Commissioners Court on Tuesday quietly reauthorized a controversial program that trains local law enforcement officers to help federal agents screen for illegal immigrants in the jails.

The last time the five-member court voted to renew the so-called 287(g) partnership in 2009, the meeting room was packed with opponents. On Tuesday, no one in the audience spoke for or against it.

Sheriff Adrian Garcia, long a vocal supporter of the program, has worked for the past year to negotiate a new agreement with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, saying last fall that he wanted ICE to provide monthly data on who is being identified and deported through the program, and also for the agency to take a more active role in educating the public about it.

Garcia got his wish as the new, 2½-year agreement the court unanimously approved Tuesday includes those changes.

“We will be able to get ICE to do a better job of sharing data and information with us,” Garcia told the court, adding that the program “continues to work, it continues to provide us a good resource within our facility and continues to be a helpful resource in providing good, public safety.”

Authorized by Congress in the late 1990s, the program has been credited with identifying hundreds of thousands of suspected illegal immigrants nationwide since 2006, when it gained popularity under the Bush administration.

It has, however, garnered criticism in recent years after scathing federal reports and high-profile allegations of abuses or mistakes by local law enforcement agencies.

**Launched 5 years ago**

The local program, launched in 2008 under then-Sheriff Tommy Thomas, employs nine officers who work alongside ICE agents.
“Nobody has contacted this office in four years saying there’s anything questionable about it,” said Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, describing the program as “just a program that seems to have been working pretty well for ICE and the sheriff.”

Data being collected under a new state law shows Harris County spent nearly $50 million from October 2011 to September 2013 to house immigrants here illegally being held at the request of federal authorities — more inmates by far than any other county jail in the state.

During that time period, the county reported housing 30,306 immigrants with ICE detainers at a total cost of $49.64 million.

On Tuesday, the court accepted an annual federal reimbursement of just $1.8 million for the cost of housing incarcerated illegal aliens in the jail. The county must absorb the rest.

Michael A. Olivas, a 287(g) critic who has taught immigration law at the University of Houston Law Center for 30 years, described the program as wasteful in that it often targets low-level or non-offenders.

‘Ill-advised program’

“The fact that they’ve fine-tuned a wasteful and ill-advised program doesn’t make it a good program,” Olivas said. “A substantial number of people get caught up in this system who have not violated law, who have never been shown to violate civil law.”

The number of local detainers has fallen drastically since the 2009, when ICE tightened up program policies, from about 1,000 a month in 2009 and 2010, to 200 a month now. Sheriff’s spokesman Alan Bernstein cited that as evidence the program is focusing more on catching “big fish” — serious criminals — than “little fish.”

Olivas said “the fact that it’s apprehending fewer people doesn’t tell me it’s more focused, it just tells me they’re not collecting as many because we don’t have as many to collect.”

“It sounds to me like we’re getting less for our money,” he said. “They’ve already gotten all the minnows they can.”

ICE did not immediately respond to a request for comment. kiah.collier@chron.com
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