

Farm worker thefts prompt state police to assess relations with illegal immigrants

By Sam Hemingway Free Press Staff Writer September 21, 2008

The alleged assault and robbery of workers at three Grand Isle farms earlier this month presented the Vermont State Police with a question: Should it investigate the immigration status of the victims of the crime, as well as the crime itself?

The answer, the police ultimately concluded, is no.

"This was the first time we had confronted a situation like this," said Col. James Baker, director of the Vermont State Police. "We decided that, as far as pursuing the investigation of this case, we would not actively pursue the immigration issue."

Baker said when the troopers began investigating the assaults and robberies, they realized some of the workers might be of Mexican descent.

After a flurry of phone calls among state police officials, the decision was made not to ask any of the workers about their legal status, concluding that solving the crime itself should take precedence. Police have since charged three Franklin County residents with the crimes.

In one of the cases, the owner of a North Hero farm told state police one of his workers was confronted at the farm the night of Sept. 5 by armed assailants who demanded cash and then robbed several other workers at the employee's residence. Police said there were two similar incidents that night in South Hero and one the next night in Alburgh.

"We do not want to discourage anyone who is a victim of a crime from reporting that crime," Baker said. "To do otherwise is to put these people in a higher position to be victimized."

That approach is being hailed as a welcome change in attitude by advocates for the burgeoning Mexican immigrant worker community in Vermont.

Last year, advocates and officials with the Mexican consulate in Boston criticized the Vermont State Police, saying that its aggressive enforcement of immigration laws had made the state the toughest in New England to live in for migrant workers.

"I think this is really a good move by the state police," said Cheryl Conner, a Bridport farmer and a founder of the Addison County Migrant Workers Coalition. "We want these folks to feel safe and able to report a crime without fear of being picked up or deported."

Vermont is the temporary home to an estimated 2,000 immigrants -- mostly Mexicans -- employed at dairy farms doing manual labor that farmers say they cannot find local people to do.

Many of the workers are believed to have entered the country illegally and, in order to avoid arrest and possible deportation, have had to live out of sight and in isolation, rarely venturing off the farms where they work.

Conner said that fear has begun to dissipate in the last year -- particularly in Addison County.

"It's much improved," she said. "At least now they can get out of the house, go shopping or go to church, attend exhibits, without fear of being picked up."

For that, she credited Middlebury's decision in November to make the community a safe zone for illegal immigrants by instructing its police department to not detain such individuals or tell Border Patrol about them unless they are suspected of engaging in a crime.

Conner said social and health services for the workers have also improved, due in part to efforts by Porter Medical Center, students at Middlebury College and the University of Vermont, and a network of churches in Addison County.

Tim Buskey, administrator at the Vermont Farm Bureau, credited the state police, and particularly new Public Safety Commissioner Tom Tremblay, with reducing tensions statewide between police and the Mexican immigrant community.

"I'd say it's improving," Buskey said, pointing to the handling of the Grand Isle farm worker assaults and robberies as an example.

Baker said Thursday he was on the verge of issuing a memorandum to troopers formalizing the policy formed as a result of the Grand Isle cases.

He said the policy will reflect both the state police's desire to improve relations with the Mexican farm-worker community and the need for the police to continue to work closely with various federal law enforcement agencies, including the Border Patrol.

"I think we have an understanding now with these individuals that our intent is to solve crimes and protect them," Baker said of the Mexican farm workers.

Contact Sam Hemingway at 660-1850 or shemingway@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com By Sam Hemingway
Free Press Staff Writer

The Vermont Folklife Center in Middlebury on Friday formally opened an exhibit exploring the lives of Mexican immigrants working on dairy farms in the state -- one of two new efforts to help Vermonters learn more about the issue.

The exhibit, titled "The Golden Cage: Mexican Migrant Workers and Vermont Dairy Farmers," features photographs and audio interviews with workers and their farmer employers discussing their lives and connection they've forged with each other.

In addition, a newly released documentary on the Mexican workers by Cornwall filmmaker Bjorn Jackson is slated for an Oct. 9 showing at the Town Hall Theater in Middlebury at 7 p.m. Admission is free.

The exhibit at the folklife center was assembled over the past year by Chris Urban, for three years an English language instructor for Mexican farm workers in the state. The photographs were shot by Caleb Kenna.

The Golden Cage portion of the exhibit title is a reference to a line in a Mexican song about life as an illegal alien in the United States that says, "I'm in a golden cage, but I'm still a prisoner."

Urban's interviews with the workers and the farmers includes one with a Mexican immigrant who described his travails as he made the journey from his homeland to the United States in search of a better economic future.

"We walked two days and two nights," the person recalled in the interview. "It's not easy. You risk your life. You play with death ... because when I crossed in the desert I saw two, two bodies, two dead people."

In another interview, a Vermont dairy farmer talked about one of the workers he hired and what happened to him after several of his friends were apprehended by police.

"All of a sudden all his buddies are gone," the farmer said. "So now he hasn't been to church since last March, you know, and that really bothers me. That really bothers me, 'cause that's kind of what holds this guy together."

Jackson's movie, titled "Under the Cloak of Darkness", includes interviews with two Mexican workers, Middlebury Police Chief Tom Hanley, Urban, several state lawmakers and Addison County advocates for the workers.

Jackson, son of Vermont folk artist Woody Jackson, said he knew little about the Mexican farm worker community in Vermont when he started filming more than a year ago.

"I learned everything you see in the movie," Jackson said. "I had no idea these guys were here."
Contact Sam Hemingway at 660-1850 or e-mail at shemingway@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com