

Deporting lawbreakers

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The federal government is finally tackling another law-and-order aspect of immigration: deporting convicted criminals. While each of the estimated 12 million to 20 million illegal aliens in the United States is breaking the law by residing in this country, the urgency to apprehend aliens who are convicted criminals finally seems to be a priority at the Department of Homeland Security. This new push follows a failed bid by the White House and some members of Congress to grant amnesty to illegal aliens.

Under a new Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) program launched in November, illegal aliens who are behind bars in state prison for non-violent crimes may be released early from prison, but only on the condition that they are deported immediately. As part of the process, they waive the right to appeal their conviction and would face the entirety of their prison term without parole if they are caught trying to re-enter the United States.

The program, known as ICE Rapid Removal of Eligible Parolees Accepted for Transfer (REPAT), could affect some of the estimated 200,000 illegal aliens behind bars who may face deportation in 2008, according to DHS. Press reports indicate that in 2007, ICE deported 276,912 illegal aliens, though that number included many who were arrested for criminal, rather than civil, immigration charges. In fiscal 2007, ICE identified 164,000 illegal aliens behind bars, though an ICE spokeswoman did not have an estimate as to how many of these convicts would be eligible to receive a shortened sentence from the state government that incarcerated them.

The federal rapid-removal program is based on success stories in Arizona and New York, where similar programs saved taxpayers millions of dollars and offered some peace of mind to law-abiding Americans, who know these criminals will be returned to their homelands and no longer freely roaming the streets. From 1995 to 2007, New York's program saved taxpayers some \$140.7 million, while Arizonans saved an estimated \$13.4 million from 2005 through 2007, according to ICE.

ICE could not estimate how much would be saved by fully implementing the rapid removal, though the figure is undoubtedly formidable. A study by the Center for Immigration Studies found illegal households drained the federal government of an estimated \$10.4 billion in 2002, and said that should illegal aliens be granted amnesty, that figure would balloon to an estimated \$29 billion.

It is heartening that, after an overwhelming public outcry on immigration, the federal government is appearing to make strides on this problem. Each state and the District of Columbia should fully cooperate and come down on the side of law and order.