

Faith group blasts Bastrop sheriff for traffic crackdown, deportations

METRO-STATE

By [Sean Collins Walsh](#) and [Brandon Mulder](#) - American-Statesman Staff Thursday, June 28, 2018



Bastrop County Sheriff Maurice Cook

BASTROP — 4:50 p.m. update: Sheriff Maurice Cook said that last weekend's "zero tolerance" traffic enforcement operation in heavily Hispanic western Bastrop County — which led to 24 people being arrested and 13 seized for deportation proceedings — was prompted by a meeting he had with civic leaders who had asked for increased police presence in the area.

Cook said Wednesday that he could not remember the names of the leaders he met with or their group. But members of the group, **Bastrop Interfaith**, remembered their meeting with Cook and told the American-Statesman on Thursday that they intended to send a different message: "the importance of building trust between the community and law enforcement, including immigrant communities."

"We are outraged that after our conversation with Sheriff Cook about these matters, his department blatantly targeted immigrants and Hispanics," the group said in a statement. "Sheriff Cook, by his actions has severely damaged the relationship between law enforcement and the community."

The operation also drew criticism from state Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, D-Austin, who said Thursday that he is "deeply disturbed."

“This operation may well be exactly the kind of law enforcement activity that I feared would occur under SB 4. The limited facts available suggest a clear-cut case of racial profiling and organized immigration enforcement in cooperation with federal authorities,” Rodriguez, who is policy chair for the Mexican American Legislative Caucus, said in a statement. “The BCSO may have caused long-term damage to its relationship with the community and seriously threatened public safety in a single evening.”

Cook did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday.

Original story: At 7:23 p.m. Saturday, 27-year-old Jacqueline Benitez-Quintana was driving in western Bastrop County when she was pulled over by a sheriff’s corporal for failing to use her blinker while changing lanes. When the officer, Brandon Stark, learned she was driving without a license, he arrested her.

Nine minutes later, Eugenio Orozco, 42, was pulled over in the same area by a sheriff’s deputy for having an obscured license plate. When the deputy asked Orozco for his driver’s license, Orozco instead handed over a Mexican ID card.

Driving without a license is a misdemeanor that can land a motorist in jail. But the officer then learned that Orozco did in fact have a valid driver’s license. He arrested Orozco anyway for a different misdemeanor: failure to display a license upon the request of a peace officer.

They were among 24 people arrested Saturday night in a heavily Hispanic part of Bastrop County during a “zero tolerance” traffic enforcement operation ordered by Bastrop County Sheriff Maurice Cook.

All but one of those arrested had Hispanic surnames. Thirteen, including Benitez-Quintana and Orozco, were picked up from the county jail by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement for deportation proceedings. At least seven had already been deported by Tuesday, according to Mexico’s consul for Austin.

For Carlos González Gutiérrez, the Mexican consul, the operation was an alarming escalation in the coordination between local and federal policing on immigration.

“There was clearly a special operation on the border between Bastrop and Travis, and there was clearly a decision not to cite and release the offenders of these traffic violations in case the officer suspected that they were undocumented,” González said. “We are very concerned that this takes to a new level the collaboration between police and immigration authorities.”