

NORTH TEXAS CATHOLIC



'Quite frankly, it's business as usual': Police assuage Hispanic community's fear of SB 4

By Susan Moses

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Fort Worth Police Captain Michael Shedd speaks during a community meeting on SB 4 — the "anti-sanctuary cities" bill — at St. Joseph Parish in Arlington, Aug. 29, 2017. *(NTC photo/Ben Torres)*

ARLINGTON — Arlington Police Lieutenant Donald Fulbright assured a predominantly Hispanic crowd of more than 800 that Senate Bill 4, known as the “anti-sanctuary cities law,” would not change how police officers do their job. “Quite frankly, it’s business as usual,” he said.

Tracy Aaron, the Mansfield Chief of Police agreed, “You will see no difference . . . from today.”

To abate the confusion, fear, and anxiety about SB 4, about 10 police officers representing Arlington, Fort Worth, Kennedale, and Mansfield Police Departments met Aug. 29 at St. Joseph Parish in Arlington for a question-and-answer session about how the controversial law affects police work.

The law's critics have said it would encourage racial profiling by police and diminish cooperation between immigrant communities and local law enforcement in fighting crime. Many fear a routine traffic stop could lead to deportation.

St. Joseph parishioner Josephine Lopez Paul, lead organizer of Arlington Mansfield Organizing Strategy, the event's sponsor, hoped the session would dispel uncertainty and alarm in the immigrant community. "It's important to get people together in one space. The undocumented can't come out of shadows as individuals, but in this forum they can come out."

Most who attended fear deportation for themselves or close family members. Itzel, a junior at the University of Texas at Arlington who is studying to become an occupational therapist, was brought to the United States in 2002 as a child. She is currently protected from deportation under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy (commonly known as Dreamers), but she admitted she is worried for her future and the future of her parents and siblings.

She attended the forum because she wanted to be better informed. "I am nervous, my family is nervous. We need a new system [of immigration]. It has to change," she said.



Women and men listen to a police officer speak during a community meeting on SB 4 at St. Joseph Parish in Arlington on Tuesday. (NTC photo/Ben Torres)

About SB 4

The bill, signed into law by Governor Greg Abbott on May 7, has generated objections from several police chiefs and a lawsuit from a number of Texas municipalities.

On Aug. 30, Federal Judge Orlando Garcia issued a preliminary injunction to prevent significant parts of the law from taking effect as scheduled on Sept. 1 while the lawsuit proceeds.

"The public interest in protecting constitutional rights, maintaining trust in local law enforcement, and avoiding the heavy burdens that SB 4 imposes on local entities will be served by enjoining these portions of SB 4," said Judge Garcia.

Texas bishops also oppose the law. Bishop Michael Olson said SB 4 could "harm the common good because it fosters an attitude of suspicion of the legal status of all immigrants." Instead, "enforcement measures should have the goal of targeting dangerous criminals for incarceration and deportation."

SB 4: What's Not Allowed

At the forum, Lt. Fulbright presented a brief overview of how the controversial law affects the police, explaining the law specifies more things an officer “can’t do” than “can do.” According to Lt. Fulbright, officers may not ask the immigration status of victims of crimes, individuals reporting a crime, or witnesses to a crime.

“Police officers want to help people who need our help, who are in trouble, not just those from the United States,” he said to great applause.

Officers are also not permitted to ask immigration status in churches, schools, hospitals, and community centers, such as those housing evacuees from Hurricane Harvey.

However, city officials, chiefs of police, and sheriffs would incur civil and criminal penalties if they issue a blanket policy prohibiting officers from asking immigration status. Judge Garcia blocked this portion of the law because it violates free speech protections guaranteed by the First Amendment. The provision requiring law enforcement officials comply with all federal “detainer” requests, was also blocked by Judge Garcia, as it would violate the Fourth Amendment.

Most of the questions for the officers regarded the rights of individuals during traffic stops.

Fort Worth Police Captain Michael Shedd responded that traffic officers are only concerned with establishing identity and residence, and not the person’s citizenship or visa status. “We follow the letter of the law and nothing more,” he asserted.

Kennedale Chief of Police Tommy Williams made the personal observation that many have the fear “police are chomping at the bit to be immigration officers. That’s not true.”

Moving Forward, Together

Several officers acknowledged the immigrant community’s concerns about the law and urged each person to know their rights, even as noncitizens. Catholic Charities Fort Worth distributed booklets that detailed a person’s rights when interacting with law enforcement.

If SB 4 is fully implemented, police are worried that individuals may be afraid to report crimes. However, “every police department needs your help. We need to work together and trust each other,” said Fort Worth Hispanic Community Public Information Officer Daniel Segura.

The forum helped build some trust for Ana Aguilar, who said she learned a lot of information. “I am satisfied now, more calm,” said the St. Joseph parishioner. “I see the police are just human people, and I am positive they want to help us.”

Father Daniel Kelley, pastor of St. Joseph, said the evening achieved his goal to “get my parishioners’ questions answered about SB 4 and get them comfortable talking with the police.”

The spirit of mutual cooperation with the police lasted beyond the forum’s official close. About 40 people huddled around each officer to ask individual questions, extending the session by almost another hour.

Fr. Kelley and the other event coordinators said the forum was just a beginning and invited law enforcement to continue the conversation in a second meeting on Sept. 12, when the law is in effect. He told the officers, “We will hold you to your word in the weeks, months, and years to come. We want to build a strong relationship with police.”