# Bush's plan to cut illegal-immigrant criminal payments protested

*by Dana Wilkie*

WASHINGTON - The next time a San Diego sheriff's deputy arrests a man who tries to steal a car, hauls him to a county detention center, starts asking questions and discovers he's in the country illegally, here's what will happen:

The tax-supported district attorney's and public defender's offices will handle his case, a tax-supported judge will preside if it goes to trial, he'll spend an average three weeks in the local jail at $100 each day, a state prison could house him for years at $121 a day, and tax-funded probation officers will follow his progress.

Only after that will he be deported.

For years, the White House and border communities such as San Diego have argued over who should pay for all this. As a group of border states Wednesday unveiled a report on the costs of incarcerating illegal immigrants linked to crimes, President Bush is again trying to eliminate all federal reimbursement for the task.

The recurring battle over this reimbursement - known in Washington parlance as the "State Criminal Alien Assistance Program," or SCAAP - has a predictable rhythm: For six years, the Republican president has axed the money from his budget plan, lawmakers from border states have howled, and budget writers have held press conferences, hearings and behind-door talks to put some money back in.

Still, those reimbursements have declined steadily during the 14 years the program has been in place.

"Gov. Schwarzenegger believes the federal government should live up to its responsibility and secure the border," said spokesman Bill Maile. "Cutting back the program would be unacceptable and a serious hit to our state."

Congress approved the reimbursement program in 1994, and it helped counties, cities and states that were struggling to provide not only jails for illegal immigrants, but also funding for prosecutors, public defenders, translation services, courtrooms, judges, probation services and juvenile detention.

"They're a burden to everybody's system, not only here but statewide," said San Diego Sheriff's Lt. Phil Brust, who says one of every 13 inmates in local jails is undocumented. "It costs money to provide medical care, housing and food."

The federal reimbursement program provides only minimal relief to cities and counties that apprehend illegal immigrants and to the states that imprison them. One study released last summer found that illegal immigrants cost the San Diego County law enforcement system about $75 million a year. The county received just under $2.5 million in federal reimbursements in fiscal 2007.

The Border Counties Coalition Wednesday released its report showing that from 1999 to 2006, border counties - including San Diego - spent $1.2 billion in law enforcement costs on illegal immigrants. The report can be viewed online at bordercounties.org.

"Our goal is to show the federal government just what the impact was," said Isaac Reyes, a lobbyist for the coalition. "The fact that (the White House is) proposing to add new border patrol agents is welcome, but that doesn't mean they should get a free pass from paying the cost that our local counties have to absorb."

There are also separate costs to cities and to the California state prison system.

California, which has more illegal immigrants that any other state, spends about $1 billion a year incarcerating the immigrants, who make up from 11 percent to 14 percent of the population in the state's 33 prisons. SCAAP payments tend to be less than 25 percent of that cost, and sometimes have been as low as 12 percent.

For San Diego County, payments have dropped from a high of $8 million in 1999 to $2.5 million last year. For California, they went from $237 million to $151 million.

Whether the border counties' report will have much impact on the White House is doubtful. Bush championed federal reimbursement for illegal immigrants when he was Texas governor. Once he got to the White House, he argued that because Washington sends millions to states to enforce the borders, it is the states' responsibility to deal with those who cross over illegally.

"Funds currently dedicated to the SCAAP Program could be put to better use helping to control the border and improving immigration enforcement," said U.S. Department of Justice spokesman Erik Ablin, noting that Bush is proposing $100 million to improve enforcement along the nation's southwest borders.

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