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Trump administration challenges N.J. rules that restrict what cops share with immigration officials

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The U.S. Department of Justice is joining a lawsuit against New Jersey's attorney general, challenging rules he put in place two years ago to limit how much information local cops can share with federal immigration officers.

In 2018, state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal issued restrictions on what police officers in New Jersey could share with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, better known as ICE. The "Immigrant Trust Directive" limited when police can ask about someone's immigration status or turn unauthorized immigrants over for deportation.

Critics said those rules hurt public safety. Ocean County filed a lawsuit challenging the limits in September, and Cape May County filed another the month after.

On Friday, federal officials in President Donald Trump's administration agreed that parts of the restrictions were unconstitutional, according to court documents filed Friday in U.S. District Court in New Jersey.

In order to enforce immigration law, federal officers "must have information concerning the whereabouts of aliens," officials argued. The rules amount to "passive resistance that frustrates federal programs," they said, quoting another lawsuit.

The argument, submitted on behalf of U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito, in New Jersey, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Joseph Hunt and other officials, will help bolster Ocean County's case as it moves through the courts.

Proponents of the restrictions argue that immigrants may not talk to any cops if they think it could lead to deportation, which could cut police off from valuable sources of information. The rules pushed back against Trump's attempts to cut down on undocumented immigration to the U.S. — an effort that has included widespread ICE arrests in the state.

In a statement, Grewal said he was "deeply disappointed."

"At a time when we need to be building bridges with our immigrant communities, the federal government is working to push them further into the shadows," said Grewal, the top state law enforcement agent in Gov. Phil Murphy's administration.

Grewal said his directive “serves an important role in New Jersey: to ensure that all residents, including our diverse immigrant communities, feel safe interacting with state and local police.”

“That helps us protect public safety by ensuring that victims and witnesses come forward and report crimes to law enforcement without fear of deportation,” he added.

“Nothing about today’s lawsuit changes that. The federal government has every right to keep doing its job, but it has no right to stop our law enforcement officers from doing ours.”

Murphy, a Democrat, is a frequent critic of Trump and has repeatedly vowed to protect immigrants against the Republican president’s policies.