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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Getting ready for the worst

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####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Advocates for immigrants and refugees in Vermont fear
3 that the state may be the next target of a Trump administration —
4 which is now focusing on recent arrivals who have been
5 following the rules and leaving a paper trail

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 In light of the violent and sometimes homicidal attacks in
8 Minnesota and Maine on immigrants, protestors, and American
9 civil liberties, Vermont is gearing up for if — or when — the same
10 ugly things happen here.

11 In Vermont, respected and welcomed immigrants are
12 working on our farms as well as in our cities and factories, taking
13 care of our elderly, repairing our decks, painting murals on our
14 walls, and being warmly welcomed into our communities. To
15 keep Vermont’s immigrant population safe, an eye-opening
16 amount of work and organization has been going on. Vermonters
17 are becoming primed to take action.

18 On Jan. 29, more than 1,100 people attended a Zoom
19 conference to learn about the current state of immigrant
20 protection in Vermont and how they can help.

21 “Thank you all for tuning in,” said attorney and former Lt.
22 Gov. Molly Gray, who now leads the Vermont Afghan Alliance.
23 The nonprofit, which works to support and assist immigrants from
24 Afghanistan who resettle in this country, organized the
25 conference.

26 “We initially created this information session with the
27 hope of sharing information with volunteers, allies and members
28 of the public about how they can support the communities that
29 we all work with,” Gray said. “We anticipated a couple of
30 hundred people. But over 1,100 people have RSVPed.”

31 “I’m glad to know we’re not alone,” one immigrant rights
32 attorney commented.

33 Signaling the strength of protections in Vermont against
34 violence and enforced deportation, other organizations joined
35 Gray at the conference, including Migrant Justice, Vermont
36 Interfaith Action (VIA), the Vermont arm of U.S. Committee for
37 Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI-VT), the Ethiopian Community
38 Development Council (ECDC), Central Vermont Refugee Action
39 Network (CVRAN), Association of Africans Living in Vermont
40 (AALV), and Vermont Asylum Assistance Project (VAAP).

41 “We want to recognize that the panelists and
42 organizations here today are a few of many, many in the state
43 who are showing up and doing incredible work,” Gray said. “So
44 if you’re an organization that’s not speaking today but you have

45 resources to share, share them as we work to get through this
46 very, very challenging time together.”

47 These groups are not the only ones protesting recent
48 government violence against immigrants.

49 Marches have been happening all over the state. For
50 example, in freezing weather on Jan. 30, thousands of people
51 carrying homemade signs took to the street in Burlington to
52 protest federal actions by ICE (Immigration and Customs
53 Enforcement) and other agencies.

54 Other kinds of organizing is happening as well. Third Act
55 Vermont, for example, is registering voters to flip the U.S. House
56 of Representatives from Republican to Democrat in the next
57 election.

58 And Vermont Legal Aid (VLA), along with the VAAP, is
59 launching an Immigration Community Lawyering Initiative.

60 In a recent press release, VLA said the “new, innovative
61 partnership” would “expand access to high-quality, responsive
62 immigration legal services across Vermont,” noting that the
63 collaboration establishes an immigration law practice to the
64 organization that offers civil legal services for low-income
65 Vermonters.

66 The partnership adds two staff attorneys who will serve
67 immigrant communities in central and southern Vermont. They
68 will use a “community based lawyering model designed to meet
69 people where they are,” meaning they plan to embed the
70 attorneys in the immigrant communities themselves to “build
71 trust and remove barriers to justice.”

72 There are still not enough immigration attorneys in
73 Vermont, however. A bill (H.742) introduced to the House
74 Judiciary Committee on Jan. 22 would “require the state of
75 Vermont to establish a program to provide legal assistance to
76 persons detained in Vermont in connection with federal
77 immigration proceedings.”

How it started

On Jan. 9, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which operates under the DHS umbrella, launched what they called Operation PARRIS (Post-Admission Refugee Reverification and Integrity Strengthening), a “sweeping initiative reexamining thousands of refugee cases through new background checks and intensive verification of refugee claims.”

The government claimed it was finding cases of fraud and other crimes and began referring refugees to ICE.

“Minnesota is ground zero for the war on fraud,” said an unnamed DHS spokesperson in a [news release](#). “This operation in Minnesota demonstrates that the Trump administration will not stand idly by as the U.S. immigration system is weaponized by those seeking to defraud the American people. American citizens and the rule of law come first, always.”

However, many believe the movement to eliminate immigrants is not really about fraud at all, said Rachel Elliott, an organizer with Migrant Justice.

“Immigration enforcement isn’t about safety,” Elliott said. “It’s about power, and it’s about control. It’s about white supremacy, and it’s about enforcing capitalism. Understanding where immigration enforcement comes from is vital to informing the way that we can fight back against it.”

Minnesota has become the epicenter for massive anti-ICE rallies. And after the death by federal agents of two American separate protestors, plus the arrest and deportation (and sometimes return) of several immigrants, some court battles, plus the violent beatings and arrests of many protestors, including journalists, Minnesota and, in some ways Maine, have become the fulcrum for activities designed to protect the immigrants in our midst.

110 “The focus has been individuals who are refugees in the
111 legal sense,” Gray explained — those who “came here as
112 refugees and who do not yet have their green card.”

113 “This would really be individuals who arrived under the
114 Biden administration, most likely within the last five years or
115 less,” she said. “This operation has also targeted asylum seekers,
116 so those who have a pending asylum claim.”

117 Individuals from those two populations “have to share
118 their documentation and address biometrics with the U.S.
119 government,” Gray said. “ICE has individuals’ current addresses
120 and their places of employment, and are going to those places to
121 try to find individuals.”

122 Once these individuals are detained, they are often
123 quickly taken to Texas, Gray said, where the “reverification” or
124 “rescreening” process happens.

125 “And for those individuals who are found to be eligible
126 to remain in the United States, sometimes their verification
127 process ends in Texas, and they are let go in Texas without their
128 documents,” Gray said.

129 From events on the ground in Minnesota, it is also
130 known that individuals who may have an accent or who may
131 appear to be an immigrant have been swept up and at times
132 temporarily held at a location within Minnesota and then,
133 ultimately, released.

134 “But this has also included U.S. citizens, so the concerns
135 are quite broad and significant,” Gray said, noting the operation
136 has expanded in recent days.

137 “Now we have concern and more clarity that there will
138 be a surge of ICE activity here in Vermont,” she said. “It’s not a
139 matter of if, but really, when.”

140 And so, she said, the focus of the video conference was
141 about “building connection, building preparedness,
142 communicating what we know with all of you as organizations,
143 so that we can invite your support as we work to keep our newest

144 Vermonters, our neighbors, our friends, our colleagues, feeling
145 deeply safe and supported here in the state.”

146 **Actions to take**

147 Attorney Emma Matters from the VAAP urged participants
148 to prepare “for the inevitability that not everyone is going to be
149 able to access an immigration attorney. That is an unfortunate and
150 scary reality, but it is the reality there simply are not enough
151 immigration attorneys to respond to the volume of need.”

152 Supporters should make sure that the immigrants they
153 know keep copies of their documents — not the originals — on
154 their persons at all times, call participants advised. They should
155 ask trusted friends or supporters to keep other copies of these
156 papers. The originals should be safely locked away. That way, if
157 someone is detained and their papers taken, their documentation
158 is still available.

159 Matters said the most important thing right now, with so
160 many people and organizations wanting to help, is to centralize
161 legal intake within the state of Vermont.

162 “It helps prevent us from duplicating work and
163 accidentally working at cross purposes with each other, [which]
164 really ends up further limiting the amount of individuals that we
165 can potentially represent,” she said.

166 Matters said a new intake form was being introduced on
167 her organization’s [website](#) for people who need assistance.

168 VAAP has also been given funding by the state to prepare
169 a resource library, Matters said.

170 She said a “difficult reality” is that “as much as we want
171 to talk about harm prevention in this moment, harm is going to
172 happen.”

173 “Detentions are already happening, and they are going to
174 happen, and the best thing that we can do is be as prepared as
175 possible to support people leading up to and in the event of a
176 detention occurring,” Matters said.

177 The organization Migrant Justice began in 2009 after the
178 death of an 18-year-old Mexican worker on a Vermont dairy
179 farm. Now Migrant Justice is well-established, with a “robust”
180 Rapid Response Network here in Vermont, Elliott said.

181 “The goal with rapid response is to be able to show up
182 quickly and provide support in moments of crisis, and to be able
183 to document what’s going on,” she said.

184 Since Trump returned to office, Migrant Justice has
185 discreetly offered almost-weekly trainings “around rapid response
186 and how to observe ICE,” Elliott said. Now, with approximately
187 2,000 people on its mail list, “we’re moving towards expanding
188 the network as much as we can.”

189 Those interested in taking the training can begin by going
190 to migrantjustice.net, and clicking the “Get Involved” button.

191 “That will bring you to a web form where you can put in
192 your contact information and share the areas where you want to
193 get connected,” Elliott said. “Rapid Response is one of those
194 areas, but there’s also a lot of other work that we’re doing.”

195 The organization will make a training available via Zoom
196 will to anybody in the state on Tuesday, Feb. 10.

197 During these trainings, Migrant Justice talks about
198 immigration enforcement, who’s doing it, and what the legal
199 context is in Vermont.

200 “We’re in a pretty special, unique situation here, in part
201 because the immigrant community here in Vermont is so deeply
202 organized and has been for a long time,” Elliott said. “We have
203 protections here in the state of Vermont that do not exist in other
204 areas to the same degree. And I think that’s something to be
205 deeply proud of and to find hope in and be inspired by.”

206 Migrant Justice has a emergency line available around
207 the clock in English and in Spanish.

208 “You can call or message anytime, day or night, to let us
209 know if you’re seeing something,” Elliott said. “I will say, please
210 only reach out to this number in cases of emergency.”

Phone trees

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Vermont Interfaith Action (VIA), a group of grassroots faith-based community organizers, is creating “hyperlocal” groups or and text messaging via the Signal app, akin to phone trees. If someone sees a suspicious vehicle or hears a rumor that ICE is in town, they can pass along the information.

“This is something that’s been being done in Los Angeles, in Minneapolis, in D.C., and across the country,” said southwestern Vermont community organizer Martha Mackey.

Such people “can share some of that more nitty gritty chatter about ICE,” Mackey said. “Instead of clogging up Migrant Justice’s hotline with more local questions,” the group is connecting people “on the ground.”

These are individuals “who know each other, who trust each other, and who can respond and be educated on when to turn to Migrant Justice to ask for immediate help for on-the-ground support,” Mackey said.

VIA is trying to design a series of mutual aid and safety hubs in every region of the state, Mackey said. It will allow even small towns to have rapid response teams to protect their neighbors.

In every region across the state, the group is setting up a series of “community resilience prep potlucks,” which Mackey said will “bring communities together.”

Participants will be “going through some basic training on how to respond in a rapid response situation, handing out whistles, letting people know their rights, [and] teaching rapid response best practices,” she said. “Then we’ll be getting people set up in their own local signal groups.”

Once VIA has done the basic training, people will be passed on to Migrant Justice for a full-length and detailed rapid response training.

“We’re also rallying clergy and people of faith to go to hearings,” Mackey said.

245 VIA has a newsletter and a website (viavt.org) where
246 people can sign up to learn more. “We’d love to have more
247 people involved,” Mackey said.

248 Resettlement issues

249 The resettlement of Afghan refugees who helped the
250 United State during this country’s war in Afghanistan, who were
251 airlifted out when the U.S. departed and the Taliban took over,
252 has been proceeding well, especially in southern Vermont,
253 according to ECDC Executive Director Joe Wiah, who thanked
254 everyone who was helping in this “difficult time.”

255 “Right now, we know our clients are very afraid,” Wiah
256 said, urging organizations to “coordinate our messaging so that
257 we give them the information that they need to have.”

258 “We don’t want to add more trauma to what they are
259 already going through,” he said.

260 Though the Afghan refugees have either been granted
261 green cards — awarding them permanent legal status in the U.S.
262 — or are in the process of getting them, “we know that this time,
263 none of those things matter,” Wiah said, noting that ECDC can
264 offer in-house legal services.

265 “And so if there are any of our clients who may be
266 confused, let them reach out to us,” he said.”

267 Sonali Samarasinghe directs USCRI Vermont, which has
268 resettled nearly 9,000 immigrants and refugees in Vermont over
269 its 45 years. Her organization can help people travel to a doctor’s
270 appointment or the supermarket when they are afraid to leave
271 their houses, she said.

272 “The most effective way to help is to work with us
273 directly as a volunteer,” Samarasinghe said. “Another way is to
274 help with food security, especially and particularly since the loss
275 of SNAP benefits for many refugees and asylees.”

276 Federal benefits, like the Supplemental Nutrition
277 Assistance Program, have never been available to undocumented

278 immigrants, but the One Big Beautiful Bill Act disqualified such
279 benefits from those who have entered the country legally.

280 "Donate gift cards fresh produce or food staples like rice,
281 lentils, [or] wheat flour, and bring them to our offices,"
282 Samarasinghe said. "Our staff will distribute them to our most
283 vulnerable clients."

284 If a person wants to volunteer, they can email
285 volunteer@refugees.org.

286 "Our volunteer coordinator will follow up," she said. "All
287 volunteers complete a background check, provide references and
288 receive training."

289 In addition to volunteering, it is important to share
290 accurate information, Samarasinghe added.

291 "CRI has a safety planning guide in several languages
292 that helps families prepare for possible immigration enforcement,
293 arrests and detention," she said. "It covers medical needs,
294 finances, child care, legal support, and how to keep important
295 records safe. We also have a 'Know Your Rights Guide.'

296 She recommended the International Refugee Assistance
297 Project, which offers "multilingual resources that explain what
298 happens during detention and what rights people still have."

299 "Having this information and sharing it with your
300 neighbors is one concrete way to reduce fear and increase
301 safety," Samarasinghe said.

302 In summing up, she thanked Gray for organizing the
303 seminar.

304 "And thank you everyone on this call for showing up
305 today, for standing with the immigrant and refugee communities,
306 and for reminding people that Vermont is and must remain a
307 place of welcome," Samarasinghe said.

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