

Central Jersey immigration lawyers busy during Trump presidency

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Immigration attorneys in Central Jersey and throughout the state have seen an increase in phone calls from concerned members of the immigrant community during the early days of Trump's presidency



(Photo: Bob Karp/Staff Photographer)

Immigration lawyers throughout Central Jersey and other parts of the state have been busy with the onset of President Donald Trump's administration.

Attorneys based in Central Jersey or who represent clients in Hunterdon, Somerset, Middlesex and Union counties have said that they have been receiving an increase of calls from members of the immigrant community — legal and illegal immigrants — regarding concerns and confusion with Trump's policies and executive orders.

"There's been an increase in phone calls with people being concerned and asking, 'Am I going to be deported?'" said Helen Ramirez, an immigration attorney based in Newark who deals with clients throughout New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. She has several clients in Hunterdon County.

She said that the concerned phone calls all have been attributed to Trump.

"All of the people believe it's because of the new presidency," she said. "His whole campaign was about fear and his whole presidency is, from what I can see, about fear. That's all he wants to do: instill fear in people."

READ: [Protesters rally for sanctuary cities at New Brunswick City Hall \(/story/news/politics/new-jersey/2017/02/07/protesters-rally-sanctuary-cities-new-brunswick-city-hall/97589098/\)](#)

READ: [Christie vows sanctuary funds veto \(/story/news/politics/new-jersey/chris-christie/2017/02/13/christie-vows-sanctuary-funds-veto/97879046/\)](#)

READ: [Federal judge who presided over Trump case went to Pingry \(http://Federal%20judge%20who%20presided%20over%20Trump%20case%20went%20to%20Pingry\)](#)

The change in immigration policies when it comes to former President Barack Obama compared to Trump may have also increased alarm in the immigrant community, she said.

"Obama's priorities were different," she said. "Obama's priorities were people with criminal records, criminal convictions."

Paris Lee, an immigration attorney based in Edison, agreed that "Obama deported a lot of people during his administration, but the focus tended to be more on people with criminal records."

He said that Trump's executive order goes further by not only targeting immigrants with criminal convictions but also those who have been accused of a crime but may not have been convicted.

His office has also received an influx of calls over the past several weeks.



Hundreds of people in Somerville protest President Donald Trump's executive order on immigration. (Photo: Nick Muscavage/Staff Photo)

"It's not only undocumented aliens but also even permanent residents," he said, noting that the temporary immigration ban Trump issued in an executive order affected more people than just undocumented immigrants. The immigration ban has been halted by a federal appeals court and is currently pending the Trump administration's next move, which could be to challenge the case in the Supreme Court or to rewrite the order.

Lee said that if immigrants are confused or concerned, they should consult with an attorney so that they "can get a legal opinion so they have a more realistic perspective on what they can or cannot do."

Welcoming towns

The concerns of immigrant populations is something that has also been taken into account by cities and municipalities throughout Central Jersey and the rest of the state.

On Monday, the Plainfield City Council unanimously passed a resolution deeming the confirming that the city council is "committed to working with the mayor and administration on strong anti-discrimination to protect vulnerable communities," among other claims.

Although the resolution does not make any mention of a "sanctuary city," New Jersey Working Families Alliance heralded the resolution.

"We applaud Mayor Mapp and the Plainfield City Council for taking action to protect local immigrant communities," said Craig Garcia, political director for New Jersey Working Families.



Hundreds gathered outside the Historic Courthouse in Flemington to protest President Donald Trump's executive order on immigration. (Photo: Mike Deak/Staff Photo)

"Plainfield has long been a welcoming community for immigrants and will remain so," Mayor Adrian Mapp told the group before the council vote. "Given the president's xenophobic campaign rhetoric and the news of ICE (Immigration Customs and Enforcement) actions around the country, the City of Plainfield will be implementing clear policies to assure all residents that the role of city officials and local police is to serve our communities and we will not facilitate Trump's efforts at mass deportations."

Highland Park is planning to discuss the possibility of drafting a "sanctuary city" resolution. The issue will be the topic at a conference agenda, which will follow the 7 p.m. Feb. 21 Borough Council meeting. The session is open to the public.

Hopewell Borough, a community with less than 2,000 residents, adopted a resolution declaring itself a "sanctuary city."

Other officials, such as Republican gubernatorial candidate Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli, believe that sanctuary cities are dangerous and should not be promoted.

"The whole concept of an elected official in the United States of America declaring their local jurisdiction a sanctuary city is a threat to public safety," he said in a statement, "and quite frankly, at this point in time, mind-boggling."

Still, Trump's executive orders such as the immigration ban and his call to prevent federal funds from reaching self-proclaimed sanctuary cities have sparked protests in New Brunswick, Flemington and Somerville. Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, a group that works toward strengthening Muslim and Jewish relations, is organizing a vigil regarding Trump's travel ban set to take place at Christ Presbyterian Church at 1600 Washington Valley Road in Martinsville at 8 p.m. Thursday.



President Donald Trump (Photo: ~Evan Vucci/AP)

While the debates over sanctuary status and the protests continue, immigrants will likely continue to seek answers.

Fear of the unknown

Filipe Pedroso, an immigration attorney who lives in Bridgewater but has an office in Newark, said his law office has noticed an "uptick" in phone calls with questions about immigration.

"That's something related to all of the media attention that's happening right with the Trump executive orders and the court actions," he said, "in large part with generalized questions about what's happening, what they should do, what sort of caution they should take — all sorts of questions."

Pedroso, who is a Republican member of the Bridgewater Township Council, said that he represents people who are legal residents and those who are in the country illegally.

Like Ramirez and Lee, the questions coming into his office are not only from Hispanic people, but from immigrants from countries spanning the globe.

He said that if you are an immigrant — legal and illegal — it is important to remember your rights provided by the Constitution. If a police officer or immigration official shows up at the door of an immigrant's home, they should ask to see a warrant and check that it is signed by a judge before letting the official into the home, he said.

If stopped on the street, immigrants have the right to remain silent, he said, adding that immigrants should not sign any paperwork handed to them by authorities without first asking to speak to an attorney.

For the most part, Pedroso said, immigrants who are not from one of the seven countries listed under Trump's immigration ban and traveling into America are safe from being detained or deported.

"If you are one of the people traveling back and forth and you are from one of the countries under the administration's radar, the reality is we don't know what President Trump's next executive order may be," he said. "There is a risk that you may find yourself inconvenienced and held back and prevented from traveling back into the United States, and it certainly is a concern."

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