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# As Illegal Workers Hit Suburbs, Politicians Scramble to Respond

By PAUL VITELLO

Suburban politicians once had to master a small but demanding catalog of local issues. Taxes, garbage, crime and schools were always the big ones. But recently a volatile new issue has been showing up on the local meet-the-candidate circuit, and it is pretty much the opposite of the familiar and the local. It is illegal immigration.

Though municipal officials have no statutory control over immigration, a rising population of illegal immigrants in suburban communities - from Farmingville, N.Y., to Danbury, Conn.; Herndon, Va., to suburban South Salt Lake City, [Utah](#) - has prompted some of those officials to attack the problem with the limited means at their disposal. In the process, they have won and lost political support; grappled with issues beyond their usual bailiwicks; and, whether intentionally or not, begun incorporating immigration into the calculus of local politics.

Steve Levy, the Democratic county executive in Suffolk County, sent police officers to help shut down single-family houses crammed with 40 and 50 immigrant workers in Farmingville, a hamlet that has become synonymous with the conflict between day laborers and suburban homeowners. His move rankled many Hispanics, some of whom have labeled him as racist, but his popularity in mostly white Suffolk County has risen.

Mark Boughton, the moderate Republican mayor of Danbury, Conn., set off a fiery debate this year by calling for state troopers to enforce immigration laws, and now finds himself labeled as anti-immigrant and embraced by some conservative Web sites.

Michael O'Reilly, the mayor of Herndon, a Washington suburb, who took a different tack - proposing to open a hiring hall for day laborers in his town - drew such a flood of angry calls from immigration opponents (stoked by a national radio talk show host in Sacramento) that the City Hall switchboard was shut down for four days.

"A little community like Herndon, with a part-time mayor - we never signed on to tackle national issues like immigration," Mr. O'Reilly said. "This is way above our pay grade."

Some see it as an absence of coherent federal immigration policy in addressing the reality of an estimated 10 million illegal immigrants now living in the [United States](#) - the majority of them in its suburbs. In that view, something, anything, seems destined to fill the gap.

"Immigration has become a local issue because, at least from their perspective, local governments feel there is no federal policy in place," said Audrey Singer, immigration fellow at the nonpartisan Brookings Institution. "Local officials don't want to be responsible, but they have to respond to local concerns."

The scramble for solutions reflects a major shift in immigration patterns during the last decade, she said. Since 2000, the number of immigrants living in suburbs, legally or illegally, has surpassed the number in cities, 52 percent to 48 percent.

Deborah Meyers, a senior policy analyst for the Migration Policy Institute, another nonpartisan group, said that as the new gateways of immigration, American suburbs "are communities that are having to address a rather sudden and significant influx of newcomers, and they have no experience with this."

The illegal newcomers have attracted notice in the high-cost suburbs primarily by overcrowding single-family houses, which neighbors then complain become eyesores, and by assembling for day laborers' jobs in parking lots and on street corners.

The local response has been somewhat like the suburbs themselves: decentralized; somewhat haphazard; self-contained; aimed at enforcing a set of "quality of life" standards that are defined differently from place to place. In Silver Spring, Md., local officials support a hiring hall for immigrant workers. In neighboring Langley Park, also home to many immigrants, they do not.

Jupiter, Fla., and Ford County, Kan., are known to welcome new immigrant workers. Bowling Green, Ky., and Freehold, N.J., are not.

Some towns have cracked down on immigrants obliquely, by enforcing building codes against overcrowding. Others have instituted new codes limiting the square footage of driveway pavement, for example, or forbidding the use of rooms other than bedrooms for sleeping.

"How is it going? It's going not well," said Mr. Boughton, the Danbury mayor, whose request for immigration-enforcement powers was denied, but who sends inspectors to count the cars parked in front of the houses in immigrant neighborhoods and issue various summonses. "The federal government continues to avoid this issue, and we can only do so much."

The reasons for the perceived paralysis of national immigration policy are many, experts say: post-9/11 antiterror politics; deep conflicts within the ranks of both the Republican and Democratic Parties; and, not least, ambivalence among the general public, which opposes illegal immigration in principle but generally benefits from the low-cost services of those illegal workers - who mow lawns, clear tables, pack meat and dig holes for swimming pools.



