

Mayors say they're ready to protect migrants

Trump has threatened cities that don't comply with mass deportations

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USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

In 2018, Hoboken, New Jersey, became a sanctuary city, officially "a fair and welcoming city," to protect undocumented immigrants.

Now, with President-elect Donald Trump returning to the White House, the city could be in jeopardy due to Trump's promise of mass deportation and cutting federal funds to sanctuary cities across the country.

It is a concern for Hoboken Mayor Ravi Bhalla, the son of Indian immigrants, but one that he said will not deter him from serving all his constituents.

"First and foremost, I think it is important for the public to realize that this mayor in Hoboken, and I'm sure that mayors across the state of New Jersey, are primarily concerned with local issues," Bhalla said in an interview with NorthJersey.com.

Sanctuary cities, while not an official or legal designation for a municipality, refer to municipalities that limit cooperation between local police and federal immigration enforcement officers. However, many do not officially use the term "sanctuary city" in passing resolutions to prohibit cooperation, instead opting for "fair and welcoming city" or just not using the term at all.

However, Trump, who starts his second term in office Monday, has targeted these cities if they interfere with his mass deportation plans, which could deport as many as 11 million undocumented immigrants.

Tom Homan, Trump's pick for "border czar," the person who would be responsible for carrying out and overseeing the deportations, threatened that the returning Trump administration would use a "very, very powerful weapon" that the Democrats when they're in power use against Republican administrations, state and local, all the time: federal funding," in an interview in November with Fox News' Mark Levin.



Immigrant advocates are seen during a 2020 protest in Newark, N.J. President-elect Donald Trump said sanctuary cities must not interfere with his mass deportation plans. MICHAEL KARAS/NORTHJERSEY.COM

According to the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington-based anti-immigration think tank, there are approximately 170 sanctuary cities across the United States. Some of the major cities that are sanctuary cities include New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco.

The movement for sanctuary cities dates back to the 1980s, when immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala, which were experiencing wars and governmental instability, came to the U.S. to seek asylum. In 1985, San Francisco passed a "City of Refuge" resolution and ordinance that prohibited city funds and resources from being used for federal immigration enforcement.

In the Garden State, municipalities that declared by resolution or executive order not to cooperate with federal immigration authorities began just after Trump took office in his first term.

That was in response to Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric during his 2016 campaign and his subsequent actions in office. In various speeches during his 2016 presidential run, he called for such measures as constructing a wall along the U.S. southern border, ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

program, and cutting funding to sanctuary cities that oppose his administration's deportation efforts.

Trump acted on his promise to cut funding to sanctuary cities but was stymied by legal action.

A few days after he took the oath of office in January 2017, he issued an executive order sanctioning sanctuary cities by making them ineligible "to receive Federal grants, except as deemed necessary for law enforcement purposes." The order was challenged by various cities and counties, which resulted in a federal judge in California in November 2017 issuing a nationwide injunction against its implementation. When President Joe Biden came into office in January 2021, he rescinded the executive order.

The Hudson County city of Hoboken is home to 57,000 people, according to the U.S. census in 2023. The census shows that 15% of the city's population is Hispanic or Latino residents of any race.

The Migration Policy Institute, a non-partisan think tank, estimates that 42% of New Jersey's undocumented residents hail from Mexico and Central America.

Bhalla said he did not have the numbers for undocumented residents in Hoboken and would never have such numbers. For him, they are all entitled to the same rights and protections as any other resident.

"Our position is that anyone in the city of Hoboken, whether they are a resident or coming here on a daily basis, as long as they are a law-abiding citizen, pay taxes and contribute to the community, they have equal rights," Bhalla said. "They're no different from myself or anyone else. The Constitution of New Jersey and the Constitution of the United States provides equal protection under the law and we're going to enforce those protections."

The Hoboken mayor said the city not only has a "fair and welcoming city" executive order as a guide to enforce protections, but also a directive set down by the Hoboken Police Department in January 2018 where "no officer or employee of the Hoboken Police Department shall expend any time, funds, or resources on facilitating the enforcement of immigration law, except where state or federal law or regulation or directive or court order shall so require."

Bhalla said in his seven years as mayor, he has never received a request from federal authorities to cooperate on any law enforcement action regarding undocumented immigrants.

Ramapo College professor Mihaela Serban said she would not be surprised to see Trump again implement his executive order targeting sanctuary cities.

Serban, who is a professor of Law and Society at the college, said in an interview that while Trump's 2017 executive order was struck down by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals that same year, three years later the Second Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the U.S. Department of Justice could impose conditions on states and municipalities receiving federal funds if they failed to cooperate with law enforcement.

"That's why I suspect because there hasn't been a unanimous take on this across the country ... the executive order will come back in some form or another," Serban said. "But then, of course, what we will see after that is more litigation."