

Trump to send federal agents to ABQ, as local leaders object

Written by By Matthew Reichbach New Mexico Political Report
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President Donald Trump announced that the White House will send more federal agents into Albuquerque, citing the city's high violent crime rate.

Trump said the deployment of agents to cities "plagued by violent crime" is part of what he called Operation Legend. The federal government had already sent agents to Kansas City as part of the program.

He said state and local officials should accept the federal law enforcement officers.

"They should call, they should want it," Trump said. "They're too proud or they're too political to want it."

U.S. Attorney General William Barr said that they would send 35 agents to Albuquerque, with more going to Chicago and 200 already in Kansas City as part of the operation. The agents would come from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, U.S. Marshals Service and the Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Security Investigations team.

Bernalillo County Sheriff Manny Gonzales III attended the White House announcement.

"We will never defund the police. We will hire more great police," Trump said. "We want to make law enforcement stronger, not weaker. What cities are doing is absolute insanity."

Much of Trump's announcement focused on Chicago, another city which will see an influx of federal law enforcement through the federal government's operation.

Trump also announced that the federal government would provide \$61 million in grants to cities as part of the program to hire more police officers.

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Operation Legend is named after LeGend Taliferro, a four-year-old who was shot and killed while sleeping in Kansas City, Missouri in late June.

Trump cited the 2019 killing of Jacque Vigil as a reason why the White House directed federal law enforcement to Albuquerque. Vigil was shot and killed in her driveway, and the case remains unsolved.

Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller criticized the move.

“We always welcome partnerships in constitutional crime fighting that are in step with our community, but we won’t sell out our city for a bait and switch excuse to send secret police to Albuquerque,” Keller said in a statement Wednesday evening. “Operation Legend is not real crime fighting; it’s politics standing in the way of police work and makes us less safe.”

Vigil’s widower, Sam Vigil, spoke and thanked Trump for his actions.

Keller said his heart went out to Vigil and everyone else who has been a victim of violence in the city.

Albuquerque Police Department chief Michael Geier wasn’t confident the state would see any of the promised grant money in a timely fashion.

“We are still waiting on the \$10 million Operation Relentless Pursuit funding that was promised last year to help us with our goal to hire more officers and to bring in additional federal law enforcement agents to assist us in our crime fighting efforts,” Geier said. “While I will try to remain optimistic, I won’t hold my breath until we see all this actually come to fruition.”

Operation Legend is separate from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security program used to

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send federal agents to Portland, Oregon—Operation Diligent Valor—in an attempt to end protests in the city that have continued daily since the killing of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer nearly two months ago.

Since videos of federal agents—with no markings of which agency they work for—detaining people, deploying tear gas and striking protesters with batons were viewed widely on social media and TV, protests in the city have grown.

Both of New Mexico's U.S. Senators, along with 25 other colleagues, asked Barr and Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf in a letter about the use of anonymous federal agents in U.S. cities.

"Critically, it remains unclear what legal authorities the federal government has invoked for its militarized interventions in American cities," the letter read. "All of this is part of an alarming pattern by the Trump Administration in taking an aggressive and excessive response to protests catalyzed by the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many others.

New Mexico reaction

Ahead of the president's announcement, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and Attorney General Hector Balderas announced that they will look for any civil rights violations related to federal law enforcement operations in the state.

The two said that they would use targeted resources to investigate and, if necessary, prosecute any suspected civil rights violations.

Balderas said his office will "actively monitor" the situation.

"It is very disturbing that public safety operations would be politicized to score cheap points, and on the front lines, law enforcement must work closely together to protect all members of our community," Balderas said.

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“If the Trump administration sincerely wishes to assist local law enforcement in our state in their regular community-policing activities, in data-driven crime-fighting initiatives, in protecting the public safety and welfare of New Mexicans, we would welcome the conversation,” Lujan Grisham said. “If the Trump administration wishes to antagonize New Mexicans and Americans with authoritarian, unnecessary and unaccountable military-style ‘crackdowns,’ they have no business whatsoever in New Mexico.”

Also on Wednesday, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall said he would monitor the scope of the federal agents’ work.

“Given the well-documented abuses in Portland, and President Trump’s public statements and news reports about expanding such deployments during his reelection campaign, let me be clear: we must and will be vigilant about the expansion of ‘Operation Legend’ to Albuquerque,” Udall said. “New Mexico leaders, regardless of party or position, should not tolerate the use of federal forces in our state for political purposes or in ways that cause mayhem and violate New Mexicans’ constitutional rights. And we certainly do not need presidential attacks on New Mexico that only inflame tensions in an effort to politicize serious issues like improving community safety, achieving racial justice and better supporting those struggling with addiction and mental health issues,” Udall said.

For more information, visit: <https://bit.ly/3hsPpK7>

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