

“DANBURY 11” SUE CITY OFFICIALS, ICE AGENTS OVER UNLAWFUL ARRESTS

*Current and former Latino residents of Danbury allege pattern
of unlawful and discriminatory law enforcement*

September 26th, 2007

DANBURY, CT – Nine of the eleven day laborers arrested in Danbury last September and now popularly known as the “Danbury 11” will hold a press conference on Wednesday, September 26th at 1:00 p.m. at the Holiday Inn, 80 Newtown Road, Danbury, Connecticut, to announce the filing of a civil rights lawsuit against Danbury city officials, the city itself, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) agents. In this lawsuit, the men allege that the defendants violated their constitutional rights during an undercover sting operation that unlawfully targeted the day laborers who gather at Kennedy Park in downtown Danbury.

Juan Barrera and other laborers were waiting at Kennedy Park on the morning of September 19, 2006, hoping to find work for the day. Each climbed into a vehicle driven by a man whom they thought had hired them to perform a day’s work demolishing a fence, but who was in fact an undercover Danbury police officer. When the men arrived at the purported worksite, they were seized, handcuffed, and arrested by Danbury Police officers, assisted by ICE agents—all without a single question being asked.

The laborers were charged with civil immigration violations and shipped to various detention centers around the country. Immigrant communities and organizations across Connecticut rallied in support of the men, and together managed to free nine of them on bond. Those nine men are Plaintiffs in this lawsuit. Their immigration cases are ongoing.

“They treated me like a violent criminal,” said Juan Barrera, one of the Danbury 11. “All I was trying to do was find work. I get out of the van to help demolish a fence, and all of a sudden I’m surrounded, shoved against the van and told not to move.”

The lawsuit describes the arrests of the Danbury 11 as only one part of Danbury’s ongoing discriminatory and illegal attempts to enforce federal immigration law. In the year since the Danbury 11 were arrested, the city has continued its unlawful enforcement of immigration law by arresting Latino drivers after stopping them on the pretext of minor traffic infractions. The police use these stops to investigate the immigration status of the drivers through the National Crime Information Center database, and then arrest them for alleged civil immigration violations.

One of the lawsuit’s plaintiffs, Danilo Brito Vargas, was a victim of this practice. He was arrested by the Danbury Police in February 2007 while driving with his wife to a laundromat. He was separated from his family, shuffled between immigration detention facilities for over a month, and ultimately deported to Ecuador. In this lawsuit, he claims that Danbury police officers have no authority to engage in civil immigration arrests, and that targeting Latino drivers in this way is an unconstitutional form of racial profiling.

“These arrests go far beyond what local police are allowed to do in the immigration context,” said Geri Greenspan, a law student intern with the Jerome N. Frank Legal Services Organization of Yale Law School, which represents the plaintiffs in this lawsuit. “Harassing day laborers, targeting Latino drivers and trolling the NCIC database for immigration records isn’t just illegal – it’s bad police work and bad policy.”

Since entering office in 2001, Mayor Boughton has encouraged police and municipal authorities to target immigrants through selective enforcement of housing codes and traffic laws, and by enacting local ordinances regulating parades and public demonstrations.

“There are problems with the immigration system in our country,” said community activist Franklin Peña. “But racial profiling isn’t going to solve the problem. And the people who run the city are just adding fuel to the fire by violating the constitutional rights of immigrants who live here.”

Several of the day laborers pursuing the current lawsuit against Danbury and ICE officials will attend Wednesday’s press conference at 1:00 p.m.