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Families Sue Otero County Sheriffs Over Illegal Immigration Raids

Civil rights groups say sheriffs 'broke trust' with community

October 17, 2007

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LAS CRUCES, NM—Civil rights groups sued the Otero County Sheriff's Department today for civil rights violations committed during immigration sweeps last September in the southern New Mexico town of Chaparral. On behalf of five Latino families, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of New Mexico charged sheriff's deputies with raiding homes without search warrants, interrogating families without evidence of criminal activity, and targeting households on the basis of race and ethnicity. The groups seek monetary damages and guarantees that the sheriff's department will refrain from such raids in the future.

"Otero County Sheriffs broke a basic bond of trust with the community of Chaparral," said ACLU Executive Director Peter Simonson. "When the police treat you like a criminal because of the language you speak and the color of your skin, they cease being a source of help when you are a victim of or witness to a crime. We need to restore policing to its proper mission in Chaparral so citizens and immigrants alike can trust that someone is watching out for their safety."

Legal papers filed by the two groups describe an incident in which sheriff's deputies ousted a family from its home by banging loudly on the home's walls in the pre-dawn hours of September 10, 2007. Without a warrant, one sheriff's deputy attempted to enter through an open bedroom window where the mother had been asleep, while another shouted from the front door, "Delivery! Mia's Pizza."

Five of the family members are named plaintiffs in the lawsuit, two of whom are U.S citizens.

MALDEF Staff Attorney David Urias said, 'The enforcement of immigration laws is strictly a responsibility of the federal government. Sheriff's deputies are not immigration officers and do not have the authority or the training to investigate or arrest people because they suspect them of being undocumented. In Otero County, Sheriff's deputies are taking federal law into their own hands and violating the rights of Latinos, including citizens and legal permanent residents. These raids are simply illegal and un-American.'

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