
Your View: Sheriff Hodgson is the next Joe Arpaio

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By Christina Fialho

Last week, Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson offered to lease inmates in his jail to the federal government to build Donald Trump's border wall. Sheriff Hodgson is positioning himself as the next Joe Arpaio, whose bid for re-election as sheriff of Arizona's Maricopa County was squashed by voters last year.

Before he was ousted from office, Arpaio was charged with criminal contempt for defying a judge's order to stop unlawfully targeting Latinos through his discriminatory policing practices. Like Arpaio, Sheriff Hodgson does not seem afraid to break the law. His 2010 policy of unlawfully charging people in jail \$5 a day for the privilege of being imprisoned was struck down by the Massachusetts Supreme Court.

Now, he wants to send inmates in his jails to other states, far away from their families and communities, to do hard manual labor. This is not a new idea, but the sheriff thinks that bringing back the archaic "convict leasing" system is a good idea. Arpaio also was a fan of antiquated systems, bringing back the "chain gang" and even boasting about creating the first female "chain gang" in history.

Convict leasing is the selling of prisoner labor to private parties — or in this case, to the Trump administration. Massachusetts and other states began leasing prisoners in the late 1700s. The practice became widespread and systematized throughout the South at the end of slavery, because large plantations in the South still needed workers. Rather than pay to hire workers, plantation and factory owners contracted with prisons to "lease" human beings — mostly black people arrested under the Black Codes.

The Black Codes was a set of laws that provided a pretext for the arrest and mass imprisonment of newly freed black people. Once imprisoned, the 13th Amendment — which generally prohibits slavery — still allows for enslavement “as punishment for a crime.” As a result, the convict leasing system became possible and profitable for governments and businesses. It was not until 1928 that the practice of convict leasing was formally banned in the last hold-out state of Alabama.

Sheriff Hodgson’s plan to “lease” human beings to the federal government to build Trump’s wall may not only be illegal, it is slavery by another name. While the county would no doubt profit off this “convict leasing” scheme, the people forced to work for no more than \$1 a day would suffer, as would their families in Bristol County.

The sheriff’s actions should be of no surprise. Like Arpaio, his tough line on immigration and law enforcement undermines the community he has sworn to serve. Last November, he signed a contract with U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement to implement the widely criticized 287(g) program, which deputizes local law enforcement to act as federal immigration agents. Local law enforcement doing ICE’s job erodes the county’s trust and credibility in the community.

In fact, a survey by the University of Illinois at Chicago of over 2,000 Latinos in four major cities, including Phoenix in Arizona’s Maricopa County, found that local police involvement with ICE has severely damaged community trust. Over 40 percent of all respondents reported they are less likely to contact police officers if they have been a victim of a crime in municipalities contracting with ICE. This distrust decreases public safety for all of us.

In 2007, Sheriff Hodgson opened an immigration detention facility that was in part built by inmates jailed elsewhere in Bristol County. The immigration detention facility imprisons asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking, and even legal permanent residents with longstanding community ties in Bristol County.

My organization, Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement (CIVIC), runs a national hotline for people in immigration detention across the country. We receive a disproportionately high number of

calls from the Bristol immigration detention facility. We have documented human and civil rights abuses, ranging from medical neglect to black mold in the jail showers. Sheriff Hodgson's detention facility may rival Arpaio's Tent City Jail, which Mother Jones magazine labelled one of the nation's 10 worst prisons and Arpaio himself called a "concentration camp."

Against this backdrop, Sheriff Hodgson is reviving the leasing of human beings for profit in 2017, linking himself to slavery's cruel and enduring legacy. He should be ashamed.

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