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In Sanctuary-City Crackdown, Justice Department Threatens to Withhold Grants From 9 Jurisdictions.

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department escalated its fight with big cities and other jurisdictions over immigration on Friday, suggesting that illegal immigration is increasing urban crime and threatening to pull grant funding from uncooperative jurisdictions.

New York City, which reported record-low crime rates last year, responded angrily, as did the state of California.

The specific issue at hand is fairly small: whether jurisdictions are complying with federal rules that block them from preventing their officials from communicating with federal agencies about immigration. The Justice Department sent letters to nine jurisdictions on Friday threatening to withhold grant funding if they don't affirm they are in compliance with that law.

The bigger issue is the Trump administration's effort to crack down on "sanctuary cities," or jurisdictions that to varying degrees decline to assist federal officials in their efforts to identify and potentially deport people living in the U.S. illegally.

Many liberal jurisdictions maintain that they are under no obligation to assist the Trump administration as it works to ramp up deportations of people in the U.S. illegally.

A Justice Department statement accompanying the letters said the jurisdictions had agreed, as a condition of receiving department grants, to provide documentation they are adhering to the federal rule. "The Department of Justice expects each of these jurisdictions to comply with this grant condition," the statement said.

The department's tone wasn't well-received by some of the jurisdictions. "Fear-mongering and falsehoods will not intimidate our state into compromising our values," said California Attorney General Xavier Becerra. "Federal threats to take away resources from law enforcement or our people in an attempt to bully states and localities into carrying out the new administration's unsound deportation plan are reckless and jeopardize public safety."

Friday's letters follow up on an announcement last month from Attorney General Jeff Sessions threatening to pull the grant money. They were sent to officials in Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, Miami, Milwaukee and New York City, as well as the state of California and Cook County, Ill.

Those jurisdictions were identified in a Justice Department inspector general's report last year as potentially out of compliance with the requirement that they do nothing to hinder communication between their own officials and federal authorities regarding immigration.

Friday's letter asks the cities to send documentation that they are in compliance by the end of June. In California, the Board of State and Community Corrections, which received the letter, said it was under review and that the board complies with the statute at issue.

In the statement accompanying the letters, the Justice Department said many of the cities it is targeting are “crumbling under the weight of illegal immigration and violent crime.”

New York Police Commissioner James O’Neill said he was angered by the characterization. “I like to think of myself as a pretty calm and measured person, and I think most of time I present myself that way, but when I read that statement by the DOJ this afternoon, my blood began to boil,” Mr. O’Neill said. “To say we’re soft on crime is absolutely ludicrous.” He added that the comment was insulting to the NYPD officers who have been killed in the line of duty this year.

The city reported 335 murders last year, down from 352 in 2015 and significantly below the 673 murders reported in 2000.

Later in the day, the Justice Department issued a second statement clarifying that it was criticizing the city’s policies, not its police. “Unfortunately, the Mayor’s policies are hamstringing the brave NYPD officers that protect the city,” it said.

In its initial statement, the department also said the number of murders in Chicago had “skyrocketed” since 2015. Figures show the city is enduring a surge in violent crime.

The letters came as the Trump administration approaches the end of its first 100 days in office. Sending the letter is an action officials can point to as an example of the administration working to implement President Donald Trump’s campaign promises.

Some experts said it wouldn’t be difficult for most cities to show they are in compliance with the provision of law at issue, because it simply requires that local officials do nothing to impede communication with federal officials.

A more serious threat to cities would be if the administration follows through on threats to withhold funding from jurisdictions that don’t comply with requests to hold people in jail in order to give immigration officers time to come and arrest them.

Sanctuary city policies vary widely, but they all limit cooperation with federal immigration enforcement to some extent. Some municipal officials say their sanctuary policies are increasingly important given this administration’s more aggressive deportation policies, which focus on criminal offenders but aren’t limited to that group.

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By Laura Meckler and Beth Reinhard

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—Zolan Kanno-Youngs contributed to this article.

Write to Laura Meckler at laura.meckler@wsj.com and Beth Reinhard at beth.reinhard@wsj.com