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‘An American nightmare’: L.A. hosts first congressional hearing on effect of immigration raids

U.S. Rep. Robert Garcia (D-Long Beach) attends a congressional field hearing at the Metropolitan Water District on Monday. (Eric Thayer/Los Angeles Times)

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There was the U.S. citizen who said she no longer feels safe after an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer slammed her to the ground in downtown Los Angeles and later accused her of assault — a case prosecutors dismissed soon after.

The Long Beach mayor, who said immigration agents have seized more than 50 residents off the city's streets — including 11 in a single afternoon Thursday, among them a gardener tackled inside Polly's Pies restaurant.

A Boyle Heights pastor who spoke of a mother who lost her young daughter after a failed organ transplant and was paralyzed over whether to cremate her or bury her, as she wanted, because she feared being deported and unable to visit her child's grave.

During a four-hour long congressional oversight hearing Monday in L.A., dozens of elected officials, experts and community members laid bare the impact of the Trump administration's aggressive immigration crackdown. It was an exclusively Democrat event and no one spoke up in support of the raids.

L.A. Mayor Karen Bass and the top Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Rep. Robert Garcia (D-Long Beach), announced last month that Congress was opening "a broad investigation" into arrests of U.S. citizens by ICE officers, as well as a separate probe into immigration raids overall.

"Congress members, we asked for this hearing so we can develop a record of this moment in history," Bass said during the hearing. "We wanted you to begin the investigation as the actions are continuing to happen. What usually happens is, years later, an investigation begins to document, but we wanted to document this assault of our democracy right now. So in the future, those can be held accountable for actions that are essentially weakening our stability and weakening our democracy."

The Monday hearing was scheduled after leaders of One LA-IAF — a network of faith and community based organizations across L.A. county — met with Bass and called for public hearings in order to document civil rights violations happening in communities.

U.S. Rep. Jasmine Crockett of Texas described the current situation as "an American nightmare."

In a statement, Department of Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin accused Garcia and Bass of "peddling more lies about DHS law enforcement officers."

"I'm calling on Democrats, like Rep. Garcia and Mayor Bass, to stop spreading this garbage," McLaughlin said. "Instead of smearing our law enforcement, they should be thanking them this Thanksgiving for removing murderers, pedophiles, rapists, gang members, and terrorists from Los Angeles."

For months, immigration agents have roamed the streets of L.A., toting guns and chasing down undocumented immigrants. The scenes that have played out here — protesters being arrested, immigrants dragged out of their cars — have been repeated in Chicago, Charlotte, N.C., and other cities with largely Democratic leadership.

As of last month, federal authorities had arrested more than 7,100 undocumented immigrants in the Los Angeles area since June 6, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

Lindsay Toczylowski, co-founder of the Immigrant Defenders Law Center, told the committee that most of the thousands of calls they've received from people detained by ICE involve people with no criminal convictions. The youngest person they've assisted is 3 years old, the oldest 77.

"Stephen Miller and Donald Trump find due process inconvenient to their plans for mass deportations," said Toczylowski of the White House official and the president, respectively. "They are afraid of us lawyers, because they know we will hold them accountable for their rampant violations of the Constitution. While their campaign of hate marches on, we remember that their days in power are numbered and the people's are not."

More than 20 community members shared stories of the everyday impact across L.A.: Of a loved one thrown to the ground by immigration agents at a car wash. Of a father who showed agents his work permit and license, but was still detained as he sold food on the street. Of a student considering dropping out so he can work and not have his father be at risk. Of a parish that decided to close its doors during Sunday Mass to prevent ICE agents from getting inside. Of a Thai victim of sex trafficking — who had received a visa and is pending adjustment of status to permanent legal residency — who had their removal case reopened.

Among those who provided testimony was Andrea Velez, a U.S. citizen who was on her way to work in June when masked men came running toward her. She described using her work bag as a shield, as an ICE officer slammed her into the sidewalk.

"They didn't believe I was a U.S. citizen or bother to check my ID," Velez said.

Prosecutors initially charged Velez with assault on a federal officer, alleging that Velez, who is 4 feet 11 inches, stood in the path of an ICE officer with her arms extended, striking his head and chest when they collided. Soon after, prosecutors dismissed the case.

Velez told committee members that she now carries her passport with her.

"I think it is shameful that this administration makes citizens feel like they have to carry a passport in their own country," Rep. Mark Takano (D-Riverside) said. "No citizen should have to carry a passport in their own country to prove that they're an American."