

Statement by Kent County Commissioner Jim Talen – 7/31/18

I've been asked by a number of people about why I have not supported the call from some in our community to end Kent County's contract with the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE). The answer is complex but as a public official I have some responsibility to respond. I'm publishing this statement publicly on electronic media so that it can be easily referenced by anyone who wishes to do so.

I know that there is tremendous suffering being experienced by families in our community. I've been privileged to hear some testimonies first-hand and quite a few second-hand. The trauma to families is a huge concern to me and I believe that a major cause of the suffering is policies that are being implemented at federal and state levels of government.

I think that there may also be a number of things that we can do at the local government level to support affected families. I would like to see members of our community come together to explore any and all opportunities. I've learned in my 18 years in elected office that there can be unintended consequences for what we do in government. And I've found that bringing people with diverse expertise and experiences to a table can help develop the best solutions to a problem.

One of the overall concerns I have with the #EndTheContract effort is that a proposed solution is being offered that I'm not convinced will have the desired effect. I'd like to see the remedy vetted by people who have expertise in all of the potential implications. I have advocated for bringing people together to explore options and will continue that effort. We need to do it quickly!

Regarding the "agreement" that some in our community have asked County Commissioners to sign, I wish I could sign it as a symbolic statement of my support for finding solutions. But I have difficulty signing a document that commits me to actions that my experience tells me will not help the cause (reducing the trauma to Kent County residents). Here are three statements in the agreement that are problematic for me:

"...will immediately release a statement denouncing ICE..." I don't know a lot about ICE and I have concerns about how the agency is doing its work under the direction of the current administration. I'm willing to denounce some of the specific current actions of ICE that are hurting families but I don't know enough about it's broader roles to denounce it overall. I suspect that there may be some important roles for it to play in immigration and customs enforcement.

"...submit a motion to end the contract....to all agendas....until the motion passes." Although the County Commission does not have the power to end the contract, it could approve a resolution asking the Sheriff (who does have the power) to end the contract. In my experience, repeatedly submitting a motion is not a very effective way to get nine of my colleagues (a majority) to vote favorably on a motion. It would probably have the opposite effect. My experience suggests that I need to be able to provide good evidence in civil conversation with my colleagues to bring them over to my side and I am willing to commit to that.

"...will do everything in our power, including withholding county monies for the Kent County Sheriff's Department budget and refusing approval of budgets, to end this contract." The County Commission cannot withhold funding for a particular portion of the Sheriff's budget. I don't feel that it would be responsible for me to refuse approval of the entire Sheriff's Department budget. The Sheriff plays an important role in ensuring the safety of our community.

I am committed to finding ways to reduce and hopefully eliminate the trauma being experienced by many in our community. I look forward to working together with Movimiento Cosecha GR, GR Rapid Response to ICE and others in our community to come up with workable solutions.