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When the feds come to town: In cities targeted by Trump's immigration crackdown, a shared playbook emerges

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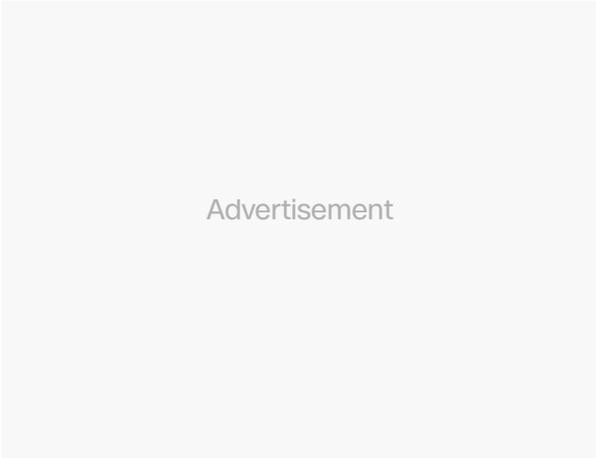
People use their phones to record federal agents at an intersection in the Cicero neighborhood in ...



As Chad Curry busily ferries his teenage children through the streets of their Chicago neighborhood of West Ridge, he eyes passing vehicles with a skepticism he didn't have just a few months ago.

He knows to carefully clock whether a passing car has darkly tinted windows, out-of-state license plates, or even no plates at all. Some models – Chevy Tahoes, Dodge Chargers, Ford Explorers – give him extra pause. The 52-year-old software consultant also knows what to do if the doors fly open and masked, khaki-clad agents leap out and beeline for one of his neighbors.

After all, he has trained for that very scenario.

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Curry is among thousands of parents, teachers, clergy and community organizers who have sought training on what they can legally do when they see an immigration raid unfold. They've learned how to document federal immigration agents' actions and quickly warn migrant neighbors – part of an emerging national blueprint for how concerned residents respond when President Donald Trump's sweeping immigration crackdown operations arrive at their doorstep.

Though Trump said the crackdown would target the “worst of the worst,” court documents and **federal data** show many of those detained have not been convicted of serious crimes – or any crime at all. And while some locals have welcomed the enforcement and applauded the arrests, others have balked at the sudden, and at times aggressive, detentions of immigrants who they see as integral parts of their school, faith and neighborhood communities.

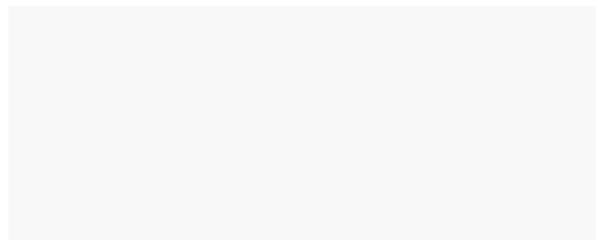
Similar scenarios have played out in Los Angeles, Chicago and Charlotte, North Carolina: Fearing an encounter with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Patrol, or one of several other federal agencies involved in the crackdowns, many migrants retreated into isolation. Local businesses **felt the blow** as workers stayed home, and classroom seats **sat empty** as immigrant parents **dared not drive their kids to school.**



Bakery owner Manolo Betancur, who decided to close his business due to raids, stands as members of the US Customs and Border Protection (not pictured) conduct an operation on the streets of Charlotte, North Carolina, on November 18, 2025. *(Sam Wolfe/Reuters)*

Furious protesters have clashed with federal agents outside ICE facilities and at the scene of arrests, and the Department of Homeland Security has accused some demonstrators of damaging federal property, assaulting agents and impeding law enforcement.

But local resistance efforts have also given rise to an informal national network of people who are looking to each other for lessons on how to push back without confrontation and support their neighbors in the process.



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“I want to live in an area of solidarity,” Curry said. “How can we alert our neighbors? How can (we) keep them safe? How do we do it in non-violence?”

As New Orleans and Minnesota's Twin Cities become the next battlegrounds in the fight over immigration, some residents there are already bracing themselves with the help of allies.

“We're not just waiting around to see what happens,” said Mich González, a member of the **Southeast Dignity Not Detention** coalition. “We're talking to our brothers and sisters that organized in Los Angeles, that organized in Chicago, that are organizing and continuing to protect each other in North Carolina, and we're taking all their lessons.”

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But, like every other city that came before them, he said, “We're making it our own.”

Soundtrack to the resistance

Honking car horns and shrill whistles have become the de facto soundtrack of local resistance as some residents have learned to create a cacophony of noise to warn anyone in earshot that immigration agents are present.

Buckets of free whistles have appeared on local diner counters and outside popular shopping centers. They have become a fixture around the necks of some suburban Chicago moms and Charlotte school volunteers.



Inside a sports bar in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood, a glass of free whistles sits alongside instructions on how to use them to alert others when federal immigration agents are spotted in the area. *(Rebecca Blackwell/AP)*

It is one of several strategies some city residents are learning in trainings being dubbed “community defense,” “ICE Watch” or “Migra Watch.” In cities targeted by the immigration crackdown, local and national organizers have

taught thousands of people how to proactively patrol areas around busy streets, churches, schools and daycares looking for agents.

While Trump's immigration policy continues to draw large support from his GOP base, a **November poll from CBS News** noted that 54% of people felt immigration agents were stopping and detaining more people than necessary.

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On a Friday afternoon in November, more than 400 people logged into a virtual ICE Watch training held by **Protect Rogers Park**, a Chicago neighborhood group, and **States at the Core**, a national group that supports community organizers.

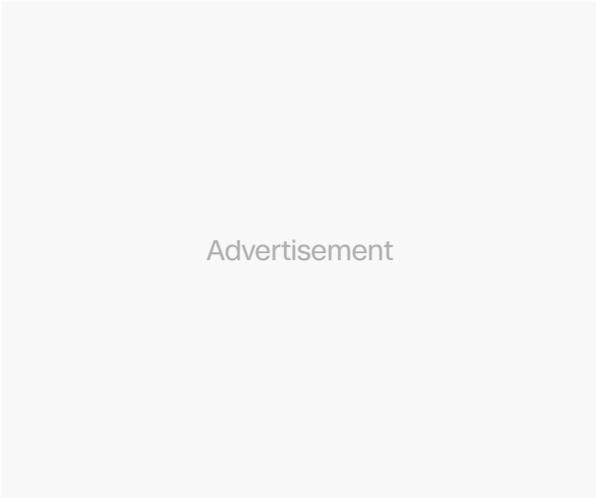
Attendees flooded the online chat, saying they were from Alabama, California, Illinois, Michigan, Oregon and more than a dozen other states. A woman from central Texas said she feels like her community is “drowning.” Another person said they were desperate to help but were unsure what to do.

Over the next two hours, trainers laid out a roadmap for how to identify immigration agents, film their actions with cellphones and spread the word that arrests are underway.

'Document, support, de-escalate'

During the November training, Jill Garvey, co-director of States at the Core, explained patrols have three goals when they are witnessing an arrest:

“document, support, de-escalate.”



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“We should be documenting every single thing they’re doing,” Garvey told the virtual attendees. “We want to get a better understanding of their tactics. We also want to document their activity that runs afoul of the law.”

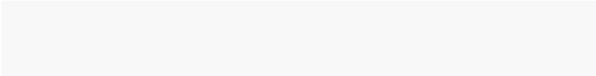


Federal agents face protesting community members near a car crash site where agents detained a man on Chicago's South Side on October 14, 2025. *(Jim Vondruska/Reuters)*

The goal of the patrols is not to interfere with an ongoing arrest, Garvey told CNN, but to create accountability for agents.

“We think that ICE agents don't act with as much brutality or impunity if they know they're being recorded, and they know they're being watched,” Garvey told CNN.

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Garvey and other trainers offered frank advice during the training: People have the right to “observe and document,” but patrollers should not interfere with agents.

At times, federal immigration arrests in several cities have become tense as protesting crowds swarmed around agents, screamed obscenities and came within feet of law enforcement as they wrestled a person to the ground. But Garvey and other trainers emphasized that ICE Watch is nonviolent. Volunteers should avoid name calling, remind agents of their right to film, and stay several feet away from arresting agents.

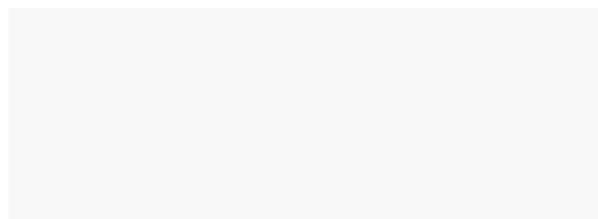
The trainings have evolved after federal agents in Chicago were accused of liberally **deploying tear gas** and **pepper balls** on protesters and other bystanders, Garvey said. The program was adapted to emphasize volunteers' safety, advising them to wear more protective gear and consider bringing goggles or water to flush chemical irritants out of their eyes.

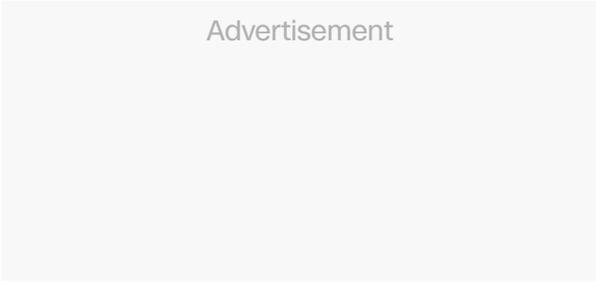


A federal agent throws a tear gas canister during clashes with community members on Chicago's South Side on October 14, 2025. *(Jim Vondruska/Reuters)*

Garvey has seen an extreme uptick in demand for training as the Department of Homeland Security launched large-scale operations in Chicago and Charlotte, and smaller ones in cities across the US. SATC has given 7,000 virtual trainings this year, more than 80% of which have happened over the last two months, she said.

Nikki Marín Baena, co-director of North Carolina immigrant rights group Siembra NC, said hundreds of volunteers in the state have attended the group's trainings in person.



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“Every night (last week) it seemed like there was a packed church of people somewhere in North Carolina getting trained on how to be a part of a safety patrol,” she said.

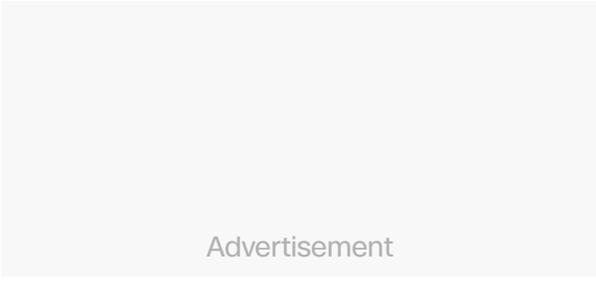
Siembra encourages its volunteers to monitor popular routes to workplaces and schools. Marín Baena hopes the patrols can ease some of the pervasive anxiety that has gripped immigrant communities in North Carolina since the DHS's operation began there in mid-November.

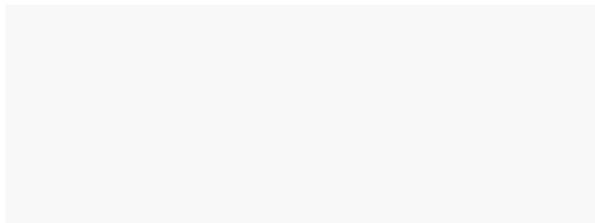
“Otherwise, there's just this kind of a looming feeling that they might be around at all times,” she said.

While programs like ICE Watch have taken hold in several cities, everyday community members – teachers, parents, clergy – have also adapted lessons from other cities as they look for ways to support migrant neighbors.

Putting food on tables and children in classrooms

On the first school day after immigration agents flooded into Charlotte last month, a resident named Samantha received a text from her husband, a local teacher, with a sobering report: Only five of his students had shown up for class.

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On that day, more than 30,000 students – about 20% of district enrollment – were absent from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.



Students stage a walkout at East Mecklenburg High School on November 18, 2025, after some fellow students from immigrant families stayed home from school due to fear of detention and potential deportation. *(John Moore/Getty Images)*

Hearing that Charlotte would be the next stop on the Trump administration's sweeping immigration crackdown, many in the city's deeply rooted migrant community had retreated into their homes, fearful of venturing outside even to go to work, buy groceries or drive their children to school.

Samantha knew that many of the absent children depended on the meals, and like parents in **Chicago**, **Los Angeles** and **Memphis**, she began to concoct a plan to get food onto the tables of sheltering migrant families – and

get kids back to class. She has asked to use only her first name over harassment concerns.

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By the end of the week, she and other neighbors in Charlotte had mobilized. Makeshift food pantries overflowed with stacks of canned milk, cereal and instant oatmeal ready to be delivered. Volunteers armed with plastic whistles patrolled busy bus routes and posted up outside of schools, ready to sound the alarm if ICE or CBP agents approached.

By the following Monday, a group of other parents had organized rides to school for more than 70 children, she told CNN.

“The fact that this is even needed is so frustrating because this is our community, these are our neighbors, these are my kids’ friends,” said Samantha.

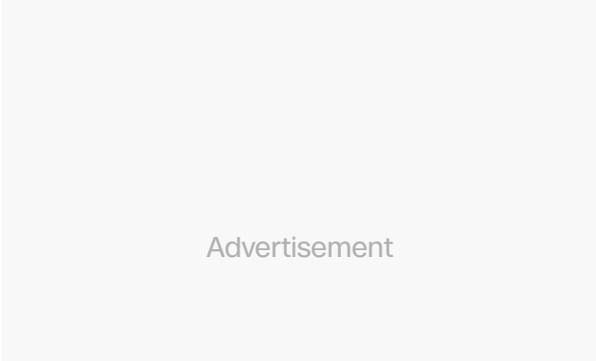
When she saw school families were being deeply impacted, North Carolina Association of Educators president Tamika Walker Kelly looked to her colleagues in Chicago for advice. The Chicago Teachers Union advised the North Carolina educators on what trainings they had found most useful, and they shared how Chicago parents formed school patrols to make students and families feel safer.

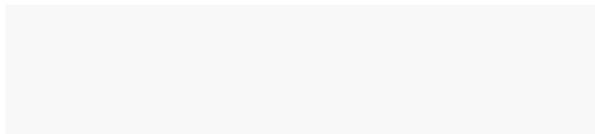


Alderwoman Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez keeps watch for immigration agents during dismissal outside Carl Von Linné School in Chicago on Oct. 8, 2025. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune/Tribune News Service/Getty Images)

“Having to be on that constant state of alert is one of the things that our educators, both in Charlotte and in Raleigh, are concerned about,” Walker Kelly said.

If educators in New Orleans call looking for advice, Walker Kelly said she is ready to pick up the phone.



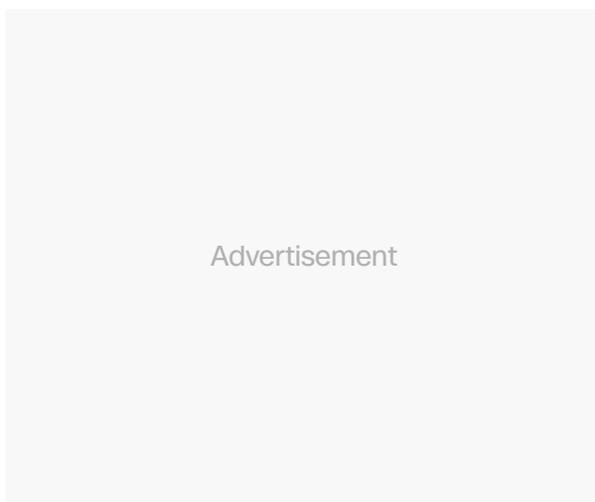


Curry, the father in Chicago, said he has seen parents mobilize who may not typically engage in activism. He thinks they are motivated in part by the thought that migrant families face every parent's worst nightmare: being unwillingly separated from their child.

"I went to the training and this woman said, 'What if I am abducted? What happens to my daughter?'" Curry said. "This is the stuff that just breaks your heart."

'Faith over fear'

Faith leaders have become some of the most prominent faces of local resistance as they hold prayer at protests, offer up their churches as meeting places, and make (unsuccessful) attempts to deliver communion to detainees.



Though ICE has had a longstanding policy against making arrests in "sensitive locations" such as churches and schools, the Trump administration **ended the directive** this year.

When Rev. Sara Green, a Unitarian Universalist pastor in New Orleans, heard her city would be the next immigration enforcement target, she knew exactly who to call for guidance.

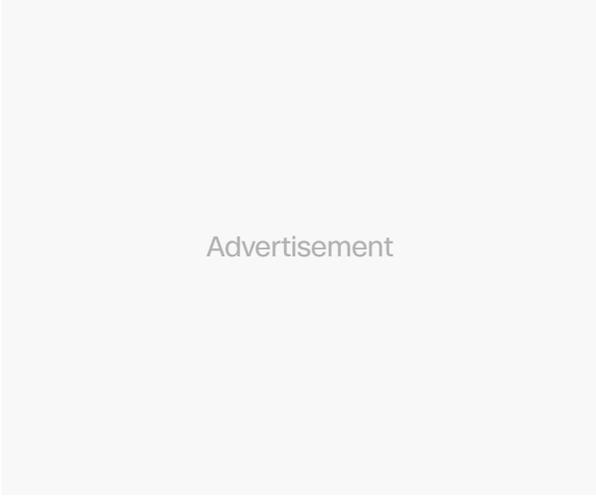
An old college friend, Rev. David Black, serves as a Presbyterian pastor in Chicago and has experienced a rattling face-to-face with ICE. Black, who is at the center of a class action lawsuit against the Trump administration, was **repeatedly shot with pepper balls** outside an ICE facility in Broadview, Illinois, in October, drawing sharp public criticism over agents' treatment of clergy at national protests.



A federal agent sprays a chemical irritant on Rev. David Black of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago, as Black and other protesters demonstrate outside an ICE facility in Broadview, Illinois, on September 19, 2025. *(Ashlee Rezin/Chicago Sun-Times/AP/File)*

Black discussed with Green that “as clergy, it’s important to be there for the long haul,” Green said. For her, that will likely mean supporting community organizers, holding prayer vigils, and spending long and emotional nights by the sides of families whose loved ones are detained.

“What we can do is be with people in their grief and not just be with them as an unaffected companion, but to grieve with them,” Green said.



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Chicago religious leaders from several faiths have formed a coalition called “Faith over Fear” to respond to ICE raids and support congregations through interfaith prayer services and “know your rights” trainings. Coalition member Rami Nashashibi said the group’s members have taken inspiration from religious groups in Los Angeles, who rallied around the message “Families are Sacred.”

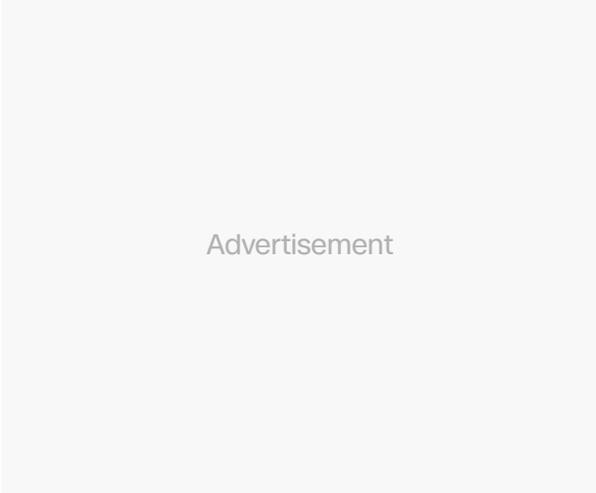
“Among the things that the Los Angeles faith community did very well, immediately, was demonstrate the power of what it meant to have clergy, what it meant to have faith communities on the front lines with strong, spiritually rooted messaging,” said Nashashibi, who is the executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network.

Nashashibi pointed out that “faith and spirituality has undergirded movements for decades,” including the American Civil Rights Movement. But

he said, "This moment feels unique."

Making the blueprint their own

Though the playbook may feel familiar, each city adds its unique spin.



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In Los Angeles, large-scale protests clogged downtown city blocks for days. Chicago, a historic union city, has leaned on several existing coalitions, including strong ties between Black churches and other faith groups.

As the Trump administration rolls out an operation in the Twin Cities, the mayor of Minneapolis has banned local state and federal law enforcement from **using any city-owned parking lots**, ramps or garages for immigration enforcement, citing how agents previously used those spaces as staging grounds in Chicago. Though an operation has only just begun in New Orleans, organizers there say music and faith have always played a role in the city's protests.

But while state leaders in Illinois and California have strongly denounced federal raids, the people of Louisiana who oppose immigration enforcement will not find an ally in their governor, Republican Jeff Landry.

Landry is embracing the presence of federal agents, telling Fox News, “I’m welcoming them to come in. We’re going to take these dangerous criminals off the streets in Louisiana.”



A person is detained by CBP agents near a Lowe's hardware store in New Orleans, Louisiana, on December 3, 2025. (Adam Gray/AFP/Getty Images)

Neighborhood patrols may also have to contend with a controversial state law making it a crime to “interfere, ignore, or thwart federal immigration enforcement efforts.” The FBI and Louisiana State Police have jointly said they will move swiftly to arrest anyone who tries to “obstruct law enforcement actions.” Gonzalez, the local organizer, said the law has created confusion among New Orleanians who want to resist but fear arrest.

Green, the local Unitarian pastor, believes New Orleans already has much of the community organizing experience it already needs, after decades of

supporting neighbors through natural disasters, poverty and crumbling city infrastructure.

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New Orleans organizers may not need to race to establish community food banks like families in Charlotte did, noted Gonzalez. In a city where nearly 20% of the residents experience food insecurity, mutual aid like community fridges already exist in many neighborhoods.

“Things in New Orleans haven’t worked in a long time,” Green said. “I think that means that we have really great organizers who have been taking care of people in lieu of governments, in lieu of working infrastructure.”

“We have people power because we’ve learned not to rely on people coming to save us, and I think that’s going to serve us really well in this moment,” she said.

CNN’s Dianne Gallagher contributed to this report.



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