

We in the West Stand with Our Neighbors

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What has unfolded in Minnesota this winter has been impossible to ignore. In Minneapolis, a large-scale federal immigration enforcement operation sent masked and heavily armed agents into residential neighborhoods, sparking weeks of sustained protest after two civilians, Renée Good and Alex Pretti, were killed. Their deaths occurred amid an alarming national trend: this year and last year, at least 38 people have died in ICE custody, the deadliest period in more than two decades.

Whatever one's views on immigration policy, the combination of lethal force in public neighborhoods and deaths behind bars raises a fundamental and unavoidable question. What happens when federal power is exercised without visible restraint or accountability, and who is actually protected by the Constitution when it is?

That question matters in Western Colorado as much as it does anywhere else. While enforcement here has not reached the scale seen in major cities, it has increasingly intruded into daily life. In Montrose, ICE agents smashed car windows to pull a couple from their vehicle before they could respond. In Durango, a father and his children were detained on their way to school. In Mesa County, a University of Utah student was stopped by local law enforcement and then referred to ICE custody in violation of state law. In Eagle, ICE officers are under investigation for leaving "death cards" in the cars of detained immigrants. And across the Western Slope, communities continue to demand answers about the death of Delvin Francisco Rodriguez, who was detained by ICE in Summit County and later died in custody in Mississippi.

Minneapolis may be a thousand miles away, but the questions raised by repression there and here go to the heart of what matters in Western Colorado. The Fourth Amendment's promise of freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures is essential, but so is something more elemental: the conviction that our communities are strongest when neighbors stand together. In the West, we have long balanced respect for law and order with an insistence that power be exercised with restraint, fairness, and humanity, especially in places far from the spotlight.

This commitment is lived, not abstract. Immigrant families, including members of our own families, are woven into the fabric of Western Colorado and the West overall. We work in agriculture, hospitality, education, healthcare, construction, and energy; we run small businesses, worship together, raise children in local schools, and help sustain towns from Durango to Grand Junction to Craig. We are part of the "bigger we" that makes community possible. When enforcement practices generate fear instead of safety, that fear ripples outward, through classrooms, clinics, job sites, and main streets, weakening the communities we all depend on.

Small towns and isolated families are increasingly exposed to federal actions that feel unpredictable, heavy-handed, and difficult to challenge, placing fear directly into the fabric of everyday life. In the West, we respond by standing with our neighbors, insisting not only on

respect for the Constitution but on solidarity rooted in shared responsibility for one another's safety and dignity. We refuse to accept fear as the price of belonging, and we reject enforcement practices that undermine the very communities they claim to protect.

The consequences are already visible across Western Colorado. Farmworkers hesitate to report injuries or unsafe conditions. Immigrant workers are more vulnerable to wage theft, labor abuse, and discrimination as bad actors interpret federal behavior as a green light to exploit fear. Parents think twice before sending children to school. Families avoid clinics, public spaces, and local institutions. Trust frays not only between immigrant communities and the federal government, but within the broader fabric of community life, leaving everyone less safe and more isolated.

That is why this moment calls for more than narrow legal arguments. In the West, we have a long tradition of standing with our neighbors. We welcome immigrants and refugees. We value their work, their families, and their contributions to our towns and local economies. Their cultures, skills, and resilience make our communities stronger. This is a deeply Western value, rooted in mutual reliance and shared responsibility. When federal government agents generate fear instead of safety, they violate not only constitutional principles, but also the basic ethic that holds rural communities together.

Congress is now debating whether to provide additional funding to the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. That funding cannot move forward without clear limits, oversight, and accountability. No additional resources should be granted unless ICE and CBP are bound by enforceable constraints that prevent constitutional violations, intimidation of residents, and the use of tactics that endanger lives. Federal agents, like everyone else, must operate within the law.

What is happening here in Colorado and across the country is not someone else's problem. All elected officials, from local to state to federal, must answer to the people they serve. Congress must act now to ensure that federal power remains limited by the rule of law wherever it is exercised, guaranteeing that all people are equally protected from its misuse.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This op-ed was co-written by Ricardo Perez and Dr. Barbara Vasquez and appeared in the February 11, 2026 edition of the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel. Ricardo Perez is executive director of the Hispanic Affairs Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the integration of immigrants in Western Colorado. Dr. Barbara Vasquez is a board member of Western Colorado Alliance.