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Democrats Need a New Approach to Sanctuary Cities

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Last week, I sat in a hearing room and watched two parents who had experienced the unimaginable—the murder of their children—beg Democratic leaders to care.

I have no doubt that Democrats on that Subcommittee did. But too often, Democrats answer moments like this with the wrong first sentence. They reach for familiar facts: immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans, police need cooperation from immigrant communities, and sanctuary policies are more complicated than Republicans admit. All of that is true. But when grieving parents are sitting in front of you, it sounds like an insensitive dodge to reach for statistics.

That is why sanctuary jurisdictions have become Republicans' most effective way to change the subject. The Trump Administration's reckless, sweeping approach to interior enforcement has angered much of the country. Americans do not like masked agents grabbing people off the streets or an enforcement agenda that treats deportation numbers as the goal. But when Democrats criticize that approach, Republicans immediately turn to sanctuary jurisdictions—and to the question that can sound painfully simple: if someone is here illegally and in criminal custody, why wouldn't local officials work with ICE?

When Democrats answer that question with a lecture about immigrant crime rates, they have already lost the argument.

Some are starting to adjust. At the hearing, [my testimony](#) and the opening remarks and [questioning](#) from [Ranking Members Jayapal](#) and [Raskin](#) moved beyond the usual narrow defense of sanctuary policies and toward the larger question Americans actually care about: keeping people safe. That is the right direction. But Democrats need to go further.

And they have a far stronger case than they've been making. The same Administration accusing sanctuary jurisdictions of endangering the public is sitting on billions in public safety grants Congress already approved, has quietly dropped tens of thousands of criminal cases, and has pulled thousands of federal agents off violent crime and trafficking investigations to chase deportation numbers. Democrats have been arguing about a word when they could be prosecuting a record.

Democrats' Answer to ICE Participation Is True, But Insufficient

Today's sanctuary fight [wasn't always a clean partisan proxy](#). Over the past two decades, interior enforcement expanded and Republicans [nationalized](#) "sanctuary" as a crime issue, especially after [Kate Steinle's 2015 killing and Trump's 2016 campaign](#). As that happened, Democrats moved from [enforcement-friendly reform language](#) to a [community-trust](#)

frame, and, eventually, to an explicit defense of separating local policing from federal immigration enforcement.

Sanctuary became a symbol of resistance, and Democrats settled into a familiar refrain: immigrants commit less crime, sanctuary jurisdictions are not less safe, and police need immigrant victims and witnesses to trust them enough to report crimes and cooperate.

These claims are all true. But they are not enough.

The Democratic refrain answers a broad statistical point when voters are often reacting to a more concrete public safety question: Was someone who committed a serious crime, ignored the law, or had been flagged by federal authorities released when they could have been held, transferred, or removed? A voter worried about a murder, assault, or repeat offenders will not be reassured by being told that in general immigrants commit less crime. That fact matters, but it doesn't answer the question on accountability for those who do.

To win this debate, Republicans do not need to prove that sanctuary jurisdictions have higher crime rates. They only need to elevate a case where a victim was harmed by someone who should not have been in the country, then ask why local officials did not do more to help ICE remove them. The sanctuary frame lets Republicans collapse a complicated debate about federalism, detainers, local resources, constitutional limits, and more into a simple accusation: Democrats chose to protect a dangerous immigrant over protecting American communities.

That's why sanctuary remains dangerous political terrain for Democrats. In a March 2026 [NBC poll](#), voters viewed sanctuary cities negatively, 43% to 33%, even as majorities opposed Trump's aggressive immigration tactics. Even when voters are skeptical of Trump's cruelty and chaos, they're uneasy with sanctuary policies.

It is also why Republicans keep coming back to sanctuary jurisdictions again and again. Their drumbeat of nonstop congressional hearings on sanctuaries is not about oversight. It is about message discipline. These hearings allow Republicans to put a human face on horrific crimes, accuse Democrats of shielding dangerous people, and force Democratic witnesses into defending the word "sanctuary"—which many voters hear as protection from consequences rather than a local public safety policy.

Republican messaging on sanctuary jurisdictions will likely intensify heading into both the 2026 elections and the 2028 presidential race. Whenever his political standing is in trouble, Donald Trump returns to his two favorite subjects: immigration and crime. The sanctuary debate conveniently combines both.

It also lets Republicans sound targeted, tough, and safety-minded. “Mass deportations” are extreme, indiscriminate, and chaotic. “Going after dangerous criminals released by sanctuaries” sounds focused and reasonable. It is a helpful tool that allows Republicans to make Democrats answer for the worst individual cases while distracting from the broader reality of Trump’s enforcement agenda.

So rather than rattling off yet another round of statistics that does not meet voters’ concerns, Democrats need a new approach. Urgently.

Start with Victims, Not Statistics

Democrats need to embrace angel families.

I did not always believe that. I, like many others, advised Democrats to avoid engaging too directly with the “angel family” frame (angel families are the label Republicans have used for families whose loved ones have been killed or seriously harmed by undocumented immigrants). Republicans were so clearly using the families’ grief for political purposes and advancing a broader false narrative about immigrants and crime that it felt disingenuous to engage directly. I still believe that Democrats should reject that narrative. But watching Republicans press this issue again and again has made one thing clear: avoiding these families does not neutralize Trump’s demagoguery. It only leaves Democrats looking like they are at best avoiding, and at worst disrespecting, the victims of horrible crimes.

To be clear, embracing these families is not the same as accepting Republicans’ frame. Democrats can honor victims and answer the grief head-on while flatly rejecting the lie that every immigrant is a threat. Allowing Republicans to be these families’ sole champions hands them both the families and the argument.

The phrase “angel families,” and particularly “angel moms,” originated with a Texas nonprofit and was popularized by Trump during his first presidential campaign. Trump made these families central to his immigration message, using their grief to argue for mass deportation and sanctuary crackdowns, and to tell a broader story that immigrants are uniquely dangerous.

But the families themselves are not political abstractions. They are parents, spouses, siblings, and children who have suffered unimaginable loss.

Democrats have attempted to reject the Republican frame around angel families rather than the families themselves. But too often, that distinction has been lost. When Democrats booed Trump’s first-term project to create the VOICE office to advocate for the families, counter-programmed it with positive immigrant stories, or treated the issue as repetitive

political theater, they were objecting to Trump’s demagoguery—not the grieving families. But to those families and many voters, it can sound like Democrats are dismissing the victims, minimizing their pain, or refusing to examine the policies and failures that contributed to their loss.

There are real moral problems with this issue. Republicans are wrong to turn individual tragedies into collective blame against immigrants or use them to undermine thoughtful enforcement policies. It is exploitative, dangerous, and false to use grieving families as proof that every undocumented person is a public safety threat. But Democrats are also wrong when they respond to these tragedies by changing the subject.

These families, and Americans more broadly, want to know whether the government failed, whether the failure was preventable, and whether anyone in power cares enough to stop it from happening again. Democrats’ typical sanctuary refrain does not answer those questions.

Instead, they need to treat angel families the way all victims should be treated: with dignity, seriousness, and a willingness to ask hard questions about what went wrong. For any victim of crime, Democrats should care about the conditions and policies that allowed the harm to occur. When the person who committed the crime was undocumented, that inquiry should include the immigration system. Did federal agencies have prior contact with the person? Were there missed opportunities for removal? Did local and federal officials communicate? Were detainer or transfer policies legally sound and practically workable? And does the case reveal a real gap that needs to be fixed to prevent future harm?

This isn’t an entirely new strategy for Democrats. Former Representative Elijah Cummings managed this well in a 2016 hearing on sanctuaries. After acknowledging the families and their grief, he focused on what went wrong and his dedication to investigating it: “I know you want answers, and you deserve those answers... I am committed to making sure we get to the bottom line.” He also used the hearing as an opportunity to look to fixing the problems in the future: “We need to ask what ICE could have done differently and what ICE can do in the future to improve these procedures.”

This doesn’t mean Democrats have to embrace the policies Republicans attach to “angel families,” or even use the term. But they must stop leaving the impression that their only response is to fact check. Instead, they must say clearly: we see the loss, we honor the victim, we will examine the failure, and we will fix what actually went wrong.

Trump wants angel families to serve as props in the story about immigrant criminality. Democrats should refuse that story without rejecting the families. If Democrats want to be

credible on public safety, they have to show that their compassion extends to every victim—including those whose stories Republicans have tried to weaponize.

Reframe Sanctuary Jurisdictions as One Piece of a Public Safety System

To shift the Democratic message on sanctuary jurisdictions—and to honor victims—Democrats need to put the focus of the policy debate where it belongs: public safety.

Some Democrats have started to make this shift. Instead of defending “sanctuary” as a label, they are beginning to talk more directly about serious offenders, local resources, police priorities, and the ways Trump’s enforcement agenda makes law enforcement’s job harder. Going further, Democrats need to stop treating local participation in immigration enforcement as a binary fight between “sanctuary” and “mass deportation” and start treating participation policies as one part of a broader public-safety strategy.

In addition to embracing all victims, whether or not the person who hurt them was undocumented, Democrats must make three points clearly. First, every jurisdiction already participates in immigration enforcement to some degree. Second, the real question is what additional participation local police should provide, under what legal rules, and in what cases. Third, Trump’s approach is not making cooperation easier or communities safer. It is making both harder.

Every Jurisdiction Already Participates in Immigration Enforcement

Every jurisdiction in America—including those that describe themselves as sanctuaries—participates in immigration enforcement to some degree. When someone is booked into criminal custody, their fingerprints are run through FBI databases that are interoperable with Department of Homeland Security (DHS) databases and accessible to ICE.

In other words, sanctuary jurisdictions are not hiding people in their jails from the federal government. DHS and ICE have the basic information they need to identify foreign nationals who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Democrats have not emphasized this point enough. That is especially true during this Administration, when many voters hear “cooperation with ICE” and picture local police helping a masked, unaccountable federal force roving American cities. But the baseline reality matters: information sharing already happens.

Voters should know that DHS and ICE have the information they need to enforce immigration law against foreign nationals in our criminal justice system. The real debate, then, is how much more local jurisdictions should do.

How Much More Should Jurisdictions Do to Help ICE?

This is where some jurisdictions set limits on the extent to which they will further participate in immigration enforcement. Local jurisdictions decide whether their police departments or sheriffs will lend local time, jail space, personnel, and public credibility to federal civil immigration enforcement. That can mean notifying ICE before someone is released, holding people for ICE, or going further by joining the 287(g) program, which deputizes state and local officers to perform immigration enforcement functions themselves.

Republicans frame this as a fight over whether local jurisdictions are standing in the way of immigration enforcement. Democrats should reframe it as a public safety question: when should local police participate in federal civil immigration enforcement, and when would that participation make policing less effective?

That is the issue voters actually care about. What makes us safer? What helps victims and witnesses report crimes? What keeps dangerous people from falling through the cracks and hurting more people? And how should limited law enforcement resources be used?

The answer should not be limited to maximum participation or maximum resistance. The answer should be localized frameworks that keep communities safe.

Trump Is Making Cooperation Harder, Not Easier

Democrats should be clear that working partnerships between federal, state, and local law enforcement can make communities safer when they are targeted, lawful, professional, and tied to real public-safety needs. But that kind of coordination requires trust.

Local jurisdictions need confidence in their federal partners before they lend scarce time, personnel, jail space, and public credibility. That is especially true in immigration enforcement, where federal actions can and do directly affect how residents view local police. If DHS wants local jurisdictions to notify ICE before release, provide jail access, honor transfer requests, or participate in 287(g), local officials need to believe that federal immigration enforcement is focused on serious cases, coordinated with local law enforcement, and conducted in a way that does not undermine community trust.

This Administration has done the opposite.

First, it has treated skeptical jurisdictions as enemies to be punished rather than partners to be persuaded. It has threatened funding, filed lawsuits, issued subpoenas, published public lists, and accused entire jurisdictions of protecting criminals. That may satisfy a political audience, but it is a terrible strategy for building law enforcement partnerships.

Even law enforcement organizations that support strong immigration enforcement have warned against this approach. The National Sheriffs' Association criticized DHS's sanctuary list process for failing to provide transparency, input, or a meaningful way for jurisdictions to respond, and warned that the approach could create a "vacuum of trust" that may take years to repair. The International Association of Chiefs of Police organized a group of leaders to warn that the Administration's rhetoric and approach to immigration have diverted resources, undermined trust, and made it harder for law enforcement to do their jobs.

Second, ICE's tactics are deepening the trust deficit. Local officials are being asked to attach their police departments' credibility to a federal enforcement effort that many view as reckless, indiscriminate, poorly coordinated, and legally risky. Residents often do not know who is ICE, who is local police, and who is simply wearing a badge—especially as ICE impersonation crimes rise. Secretive, chaotic, or deadly ICE operations erode public confidence and leave local police to repair the damage.

Third, ICE is asking local officers for coordination when it is all too often failing to provide it in return. ICE does not need local permission to enforce federal law. But community safety is better served when federal operations are coordinated with local law enforcement whenever operationally safe and appropriate. When ICE or CBP conduct large, visible, or aggressive operations without meaningful coordination with local officials, local police are left responding to confused 911 calls, reports of suspicious armed individuals, protests, traffic disruptions, and potential confrontations without adequate situational awareness.

The result is a vicious cycle. ICE conducts operations that damage local trust. Local officials respond by limiting participation in immigration enforcement. The Administration then treats those policies as proof of hostility and escalates its attacks. That cycle does not make Americans safer. It makes cooperation less likely.

Trump Is Making America Less Safe

The Administration's argument on sanctuary jurisdictions is that local officials are undermining public safety. Democrats should answer by widening the lens. The same Administration accusing local jurisdictions of harboring criminals is weakening local law

enforcement, destabilizing victim services, and letting work on serious crimes fall through the cracks.

Under President Trump, the Department of Justice has withheld, delayed, canceled, and redirected public safety dollars that Congress approved. The Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs (OJP) is one of the federal government's central pipelines for state and local public safety funding, awarding an average of \$3.9 billion a year over the past decade. Agencies rely on these grants to hire officers, buy body cameras, support prosecutors, serve crime victims, and fund anti-violence programs. But roughly half of last year's funds from OJP—\$2 billion—still have not reached the police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, victim service providers, and violence prevention programs waiting for them.

The Administration has also imposed sweeping new conditions on public safety grants that are not tailored to crime reduction or justice system performance. Instead, the conditions drag public safety funding into the White House's ideological battles over gender, vaccines, diversity initiatives, immigration, and other unrelated political priorities. As a result, qualified applicants may avoid federal funding altogether, and jurisdictions that do apply may feel pressure to shape their work around the Administration's political preferences rather than their communities' actual safety needs.

At the same time, the Administration's immigration crackdown is pulling federal law enforcement away from the core missions that keep Americans safe. Agents and specialized personnel from agencies including the FBI, ATF, DEA, US Marshals Service, HSI, CISA, and others have been redirected to support civil immigration operations, even when their ordinary work involves violent crime, child exploitation, human trafficking, firearms trafficking, cyber threats, terrorism, narcotics, and transnational criminal networks.

The Administration's approach is also weakening the systems that help victims recover and hold criminals accountable. The Crime Victims Fund is supported by fines, penalties, and forfeitures paid by people and corporations convicted of federal crimes. Those dollars help pay for victim compensation, domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, legal assistance, counseling, and other services that victims rely on after the worst moments of their lives. By pardoning convicted federal criminals and wiping away at least \$113 million in fines and penalties owed to the Fund, the President did not only erase accountability for offenders. He denied victims money that was meant to support their recovery.

And while the Administration has poured enormous energy into immigration prosecutions, it has also allowed thousands of federal criminal cases to collapse. In the first six months of the Trump Administration, the Department of Justice closed more than 23,000 pending criminal cases without prosecution, including cases involving elder abuse, fentanyl and other deadly drugs, money laundering, domestic terrorism, federal procurement fraud,

health care fraud, labor racketeering, and human trafficking. Letting those cases go unanswered denies victims their day in court, reduces further deposits into the Crime Victims Fund, and sends a dangerous message that serious criminal conduct may not be prosecuted.

That is the significant gap between this Administration's public safety rhetoric and its actual record—one that Democrats need to be calling out constantly. Pardoning offenders, abandoning criminal cases, destabilizing victim services, cutting violence prevention programs, and undermining local justice systems do not make communities safer. They make it harder for victims to recover, harder for law enforcement to do its job, and easier for serious criminals to avoid accountability.

Conclusion

The sanctuary debate should not be a symbolic fight over whether a jurisdiction wears the right label. It should be a serious conversation about what actually protects the public: targeted federal immigration enforcement, smart local cooperation, trusted policing, and accountability when government fails.

That starts with victims. The parents who testified with me last week did not want another statistic. They needed someone in power to say: this mattered, we're going to find out what went wrong, and we're going to fix it. That is not a concession to Trump's frame. It is the least that a serious public safety party owes to the people it claims to protect.

Democrats should ask the hard questions: what failed, who had the information, what policies mattered, and what would reduce the chance of another tragedy? Those questions don't betray immigrant communities. They're the responsible path to building a system that protects everyone.

From there, Democrats can make the broader case on much stronger ground. Public safety requires serious immigration enforcement. It requires local partnerships tailored to local conditions. It requires credibility with immigrant communities. And it requires a federal administration that is not actively making police work harder.

The goal is not sanctuary or non-cooperation as a virtue. The goal is public safety that actually works. By moving beyond their tired refrain, Democrats can do better by victims, immigrant communities, and Americans.

