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# Mayor blames police for racial profiling

## Critics accuse Bogota official of hypocrisy

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Accused of hypocrisy in hiring two illegal immigrants, a Bergen County mayor — and staunch foe of illegal immigration — is turning the tables once again, accusing his own police department of racial profiling.

Bogota Mayor Steve Lonagan, whose English-only stances have made him a national figure in right-wing circles, last week said he accidentally hired two undocumented workers to assemble yard signs for his taxpayer-advocacy group. Police last Monday had picked up the two workers on Lonagan's property, allegedly in response to a call from a neighbor who noticed two men inside the unoccupied house.

On Saturday, Lonagan began calling for an investigation of the police action. "I want to know who made the call, I want to know when and I want to know why these guys were detained," Lonagan said. "These guys had one problem, and that's that they were Hispanic-looking."

Political opponents in the town say Lonagan is creating a diversion. "I'm very upset," said Democratic Councilwoman Tara Sharp. "To accuse our police department of racial profiling is ridiculous — the only problems with that were created by Mayor Lonagan himself."

The Republican mayor — a one-

time gubernatorial and congressional candidate — once tried to have McDonald's remove a Spanish-language billboard in Bogota. He also sought to designate English as the town's official language, a move rebuffed in court. And, in August, he wanted the town to apply for a federal program that deputizes local police to enforce immigration laws.

"I find it appalling," said Pat McHale, a Democrat running to replace Lonagan as mayor. "Here he is saying that we should have (illegal immigrants) arrested and, when we do arrest them, he's screaming racial profiling."

Lonagan, 51, who has served as mayor of Bogota for nearly 12 years, is not seeking re-election.

The Bergen County town of 8,100 residents has seen a dramatic increase in its Hispanic population in recent years. Between 2000 and 2006, Bogota's school district had the third-largest Hispanic student enrollment growth in the state, behind only Red Bank and Fairview. During that time, Bogota gained 249 Hispanic students and lost 283 white students, census data show.

While parrying with his police department over the weekend, Lonagan changed his story about how he came to hire the two illegal immigrants.

In earlier news reports, Lonagan said the two men came into his

second-floor office on River Road looking for work. According to Lonagan's earlier explanation, he dropped the men off at his house on Bogota Gardens before going to retrieve working papers for them to fill out. But they were gone when he returned.

Yesterday, he told The Star-Ledger that the men did not come to his office looking for work. "We went and picked them up," Lonagan said. Pressed for further details about where he found the men, Lonagan said: "I gotta tell you the truth, I don't know. Somebody from my staff — I don't know exactly where they were standing."

All employers are required to have prospective employees fill out an I-9 form and provide identification to verify their eligibility to work for an American employer in the United States, said Susanne Peticolas, a partner who practices immigration law at Newark-based Gibbons, P.C.

Lonagan said the workers, who spoke only broken English, assured him that they had proper identification, but he had not yet checked their identification or processed the paperwork before the men were picked up. "They might have been undocumented workers, but I didn't get a chance to figure that out."

Police checked the two men's identification. One of the men was charged with a disorderly persons violation because the name he gave

didn't match the Mexican identification card he had according to authorities man, who wasn't charged they were in the United States illegally and a person them to work on the sign.

"If the police have trouble verifying IDs, employers supposed to do," said. "The document is my job, that's the government just because the federal fails to enforce immigration laws, I, as an employer, not be held responsible."

The federal government not actually hold an employer for employees who fake identification. "The government does not expect them to be a document fraud," Peticolas said.

The court of public opinion be a different matter.

"I think it's the epitome of hypocrisy — his (Lonagan) legal alien thing, the I-9 sign, and then he goes this," said Charles Severmer Democratic council member Bogota. "All the problems it he's caused with his stance, and then when caught it's everybody's own."

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