

The article below was offered to Nebraska newspapers for their consideration.

Omaha traffic accident raises important public issues

By John Gale

The May 12 fatal traffic accident in Omaha involving Eleazar Rangel-Ochoa, a suspected illegal immigrant driving under a suspended license, has generated needed public attention.

Police allege that a vehicle driven by Rangel-Ochoa ran a right light and collided with a vehicle driven by Jayme Bluhm and carrying her three children. The accident claimed the life of one of the children, 4-year-old Josie, and injured the other family members.

Foremost, this is a tragedy for the Bluhm family. In addition, the case should raise red flags regarding two important public issues.

The first issue deals with the incredible danger posed by people who drive on suspended licenses, especially those who have histories of driving under the influence (DUI). I have become acutely aware of this problem as a member of the Nebraska Pardons Board.

Rangel-Ochoa has prior DUI convictions, but police are not alleging that he was intoxicated at the time of the May 12 crash.

Driving under suspension is a callous act that presents great risks to the public. Such drivers have no licenses and no insurance and have a desperate need to avoid being arrested. This makes such drivers exceedingly dangerous, willing to risk the lives of others so they may exercise a privilege denied to them by our system.

The extent of the problem is plainly illustrated by court statistics. In 2008, there were 14,700 convictions in Nebraska for offenses regarding driving during suspension or revocation, according to the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles.

Our legal system needs to give greater priority to the problem of driving under suspension, including finding effective means of keeping such drivers off the roads.

The public can be of immense help with this problem. If you know of someone who is driving under a suspended license, please report it immediately to law enforcement personnel.

The second issue deals with the lax enforcement of immigration laws as evidenced by the Rangel-Ochoa case.

He has three DUI convictions in Nebraska and another one in Kansas. Despite his repeated trips through the criminal justice system, he wasn't identified as a suspected illegal immigrant until after the May 12 accident.

The public has every reason to be angry by what has happened in this case. The question that rings out is this: How did his immigration status go undetected after so many law enforcement and court contacts?

He slipped through the cracks for a long period. He didn't become a priority until there was a horrible accident.

This appears to be another classic case of America's badly-broken immigration system. Certainly, our immigration system needs to do a better job of identifying illegal immigrants with criminal records for deportation proceedings.

It is estimated that there are 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. Congress has failed to deal with their status and their effects on society. As a result, states and communities are left to deal with the situation in an ineffective, piecemeal manner. Frustration continues to grow with the situation.

It is my hope that the case of Eleazar Rangel-Ochoa opens eyes and leads to constructive dialogue and action to improve traffic safety and immigration law.

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