[HOOTING]

NINA MOINI: We'll head now to the corner of East Lake Street and 27th Avenue South in Minneapolis. For a week now, so-called democracy protection volunteers have gathered every day in front of the COPAL Office to provide information and support with voting.

RICO DURÁN: All this project is called Democracy on the Block by Immigrant Defense Network.

NINA MOINI: Rico Durán is the Organizing Director of COPAL, which started the Immigrant Defense Network. The Lake Street station is 1 of 19 set up across the state from the Twin Cities metro to Mankato and St. Cloud. The idea evolved out of IDN's effort to train constitutional observers.

RICO DURÁN: IDN trained 35,000 people throughout the state of Minnesota and beyond. And so now all those volunteers and people who are trained, now they are democracy protectors.

NINA MOINI: In the week leading up to the election, these volunteers have been present every day at the stations to engage people who stop by.

RICO DURÁN: People come with all kinds of ideas and questions, so we guide them through all the resources.

NINA MOINI: And as they wrap up their work today on Election Day, we'll talk more now to Rico Durán about the Democracy Protectors Project and what comes next after the midterms. Thanks for joining us again.

RICO DURÁN: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: Rico, we just heard a bit about the stations and the work that you all have been doing. Can you share a little more about what it means to have people being trained as democracy protectors? What exactly is it? How does it differ from the constitutional observers that were out during Operation Metro Surge, the height?

RICO DURÁN: Yes, most definitely. COPAL created the Immigrant Defense Network at the beginning to hold immigrant issues. But then with the Metro Surge happened, there was a moment when all the neighborhoods, all the neighbors in Minnesota, they came together. And with all this training in how to be a constitutional observer happened.

This expanded when the killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti when everyone got even more involved. And from there, all these 35,000-plus people who got trained throughout the state of Minnesota, not just becoming neighbors or constitutional observers but very active in terms of watching for the neighborhoods. And so these days, as election protectors, democracy protectors, so they're still active on those 19 stations.

NINA MOINI: Can you talk a little bit about what the work of a democracy protector entails? I think it's important to talk about what exactly the role is and some of the boundaries that are there because some people will look at the work of constitutional observers, and they've seen images of confrontations with perhaps federal law enforcement agents or local law enforcement. And so I just want to make sure that as people head to the polls, they understand exactly what they would see if they saw democracy protectors there.

RICO DURÁN: Most definitely. This democracy stations are located in public places like this one at COPAL, Lake Street. So there is not just one role. Democracy protectors can share verified voting information, help organize their neighbors, support communities or voting activities, help people navigate barriers, document potential violations, but also connect people to the appropriate resources. We have all kinds of stories that our volunteers are receiving, just like dates, polling locations, right to the polls and beyond.

NINA MOINI: What are people saying? What have you heard from people about just how they were feeling about election day and the process of voting?

RICO DURÁN: Even we cannot neglect that there's some anxiety there. But what I can tell you, today, the people are more optimistic. We cannot predict any bad day. But what we can tell you is we are prepared to respond in terms of-- with our democracy protection observation. We are here to serve the people.

And I feel like everybody's getting connected. I mean, there's something-- again, we were sensing that anxiety. But I feel like people are getting more and more-- participating, coming to the tables. Most of the people saying, I voted already, which is amazing for all of us.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, a record number of early votes in Minnesota. What have you heard from people about why they were choosing to vote early? I mean, hopefully it wasn't anxiety of going on election day, but we have heard that from some people, but also perhaps just fiery passion. I mean, what are you hearing from people about all these early votes?

RICO DURÁN: Something different that I can tell you this year or this electoral season, people are speaking about issues. People are not just about the Metro Surge, which is the big thing in Minnesota for all of us, very important.

But at the same time, they're talking about affordability. People come in and share, I'm voting for my family. I'm voting for my neighbor. I'm voting for all the folks that cannot even vote. So I think issues is a big thing this year.

NINA MOINI: What have people told you about the physical presence of having democracy protectors? We've talked to some folks this week on the show who are going to be chaplains, poll chaplains, some of these efforts to just have more people nearby. What have you been hearing from people about how that makes them feel?

RICO DURÁN: The democracy protection training gives volunteers guidance on documenting, reporting potential violations, connecting the people with election protection resources. We have an IDN hotline that can be used by concerns involving ICE near to the polls or other issues. But again, we just feel like neighbors, volunteers, voters are getting-- again, working together. We've seen something positive coming out of these elections in terms of civic participation.

NINA MOINI: What are you noticing about the coming months as we get ready to go into winter? A lot of people remember that around December 1 or so was when the surge in federal immigration agents to Minnesota began. So almost being at that one-year mark and with winter approaching. After Election Day today, where do you see this work going?

RICO DURÁN: You know, something very positive, since-- this is an amazing question because we start seeing how previous conversations to the legislative session, working with our state of Minnesota, keeping our state of Minnesota.

That's pretty much a unified voice that we hear out there. It's like an ongoing work from organizations and everybody else or every border coming to and focusing on the legislative session and be prepared for that as well. That will be the ongoing work for us and for everybody else.

NINA MOINI: Can you say a little bit about some of your priorities then at the legislative session that will be upcoming? Because there were some bills and potential laws that were discussed last legislative session or last winter and then through May.

Are you trying to re-up some of those efforts, or are you paring down to try to get just a couple of things through, or what would you say are some of your top priorities in terms of legislation and changes in law?

RICO DURÁN: Most definitely. Our beautiful state of Minnesota, we have that long history of working for all people, for all our diversity, for all our resources, all of what we have to maintain this state on top of good life and dignity for everybody.

So there's a couple of things. We're working with-- in partnership with other organizations to keep our state safe, to keep our state with the level of education, health access, and other issues. But at the same time, COPAL is pushing forward organization to look for environmental justice, for workers' rights, for also health and wellness. So those are three priorities that we can take seriously. And we work in getting ready for those issues for the upcoming year.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Rico, we're just glad to have your time here. We've done a lot of reporting in the last year or so about people who have been in hiding, afraid to leave their homes. Obviously, some of those people may not be able to vote in the election, but I wonder if you could give us a sense for the amount of people who are still hiding in their homes because they fear that they'll be stopped by immigration enforcement.

RICO DURÁN: Yes, most definitely. We cannot deny that still outside we see all this-- again, I mentioned anxiety previously. But we have people but most then stay at homes. I think what we all keep is a trauma that all these Metro Surge caused. And that is extended still to some, especially kids, especially families together.

Parents, they have to come up and work, bringing the resources to their families, feeding their families. And I know for sure, they're going out. But still we carry that fear. But at the same time, we feel confident that-- how neighbors get that piece of protecting or getting the hand to hand from all this democracy protectors.

I feel like we are in a good place, that we can plan together. Even with those fears, we can overcome all this.

NINA MOINI: OK. Rico, thank you very much for your time. We appreciate it.

RICO DURÁN: Thank you much.

NINA MOINI: Rico Durán is the organizing director of COPAL.