

Dozens arrested in raids at courthouses

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PROVIDENCE — Federal immigration agents and state police raided six Rhode Island courthouses yesterday, arresting dozens of people employed by two contractors hired by the state. The detainees are all believed to be maintenance workers.

The raid led to a noisy demonstration by at least 100 people outside the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office at 200 Dyer St. last night. Police officers arrived as the crowd grew; at one point the police pushed a line of demonstrators across the parking lot.

Some in the crowd were relatives of the arrestees. Others included clergy and at least one state representative, Grace Diaz, and members of immigrant advocacy groups.

Leonardo Tornes said his sister, Francesca Tornes, an undocumented worker from Mexico, was arrested at the Kent County Courthouse.

“She has two children — one and five years old,” he said through an interpreter. “A friend who worked with her called, and said they have taken everyone,” he said.

Craig N. Berke, spokesman for the Rhode Island judiciary, said the raids occurred simultaneously at 5 p.m. at all six Rhode Island courthouses. He said a “substantial” percentage of employees of two contractors hired by the state were taken into custody.

Berke declined to name the contractors, however relatives of some of the detainees identified one company as the Tri-State Enterprises employment agency on North Main Street.

Berke said those who were arrested “are not state employees. They are not employees of the judiciary.” He said “dozens” of people were arrested but he did not have an exact count.

“The investigation was initiated by the judiciary,” Berke said. “In early June, we forwarded evidence to the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Rhode Island State Police. The judiciary has been cooperating with that investigation on a daily basis since then.” Berke declined to say what the evidence was.

“I also know that there was at least one courthouse — I’m not sure if there was more than one — in which no employees of the vendor were taken into custody,” Berke said. “They were screened but not taken into custody.”

In the two Providence courthouses, the workers were just starting their shift at 5 p.m. and would have normally stayed till 9 or 10 p.m. In the other courthouses, the workers come in earlier and are normally done by 6 p.m.

Asked who will clean the courthouses today, Berke said, “They’ll be cleaned. Not every employee of the vendor was taken into custody today. And we also have daytime maintenance staff who will have to do double duty” today.

Berke said that as of last night the two contractors were still employed by the judiciary.

The courthouses that were raided are: the Garrahy Judicial Complex and the Licht Judicial Complex, both in Providence; the McGrath Judicial Complex in Wakefield; the Murray Judicial Complex in Newport; Kent County Courthouse in Warwick, and the Rhode Island Traffic Tribunal in Cranston.

Paula Grenier, an ICE spokeswoman in Boston, said an enforcement action had been carried out “as a result of a joint investigation by federal and state authorities.” Grenier said the action “is part of an ongoing criminal investigation.” She would not confirm that the courthouses were raided, or say how many people were detained.

The raids occurred during the first meeting of a governor’s advisory panel, charged with monitoring any “unintended consequences” of Governor Carcieri’s executive order cracking down on illegal immigration. The order issued in March requires that state police be deputized with certain immigration enforcement powers.

News of yesterday’s raids spread rapidly as courthouse workers phoned relatives, friends and community leaders. Demonstrators assembled outside the ICE building in Providence at about 8 p.m. As police arrived, the group divided and people rushed to doors at the front and rear of the building.

Juan Garcia, organizer for Immigrants in Action at St. Teresa Church in Olneyville, said his cell phone began buzzing at 4:45 p.m. as he was driving toward Newport from Providence to discuss fallout from an immigration raid there several weeks ago that led to 42 arrests at stores, restaurants and apartments.

He said he learned the arrests had occurred at the Kent County courthouse “and right here in Providence,” he said pointing to the Garrahy Judicial Complex across the street from ICE headquarters.

Some of the women who were arrested “have little kids, bigger kids,” he said.

Garcia said, “This is the consequence of the governor’s executive order. All companies receiving money from the state will review the legal status of people.” (The order requires using a federal E-Verify system for all new hires, but not current employees).

Monica and Jacqueline Lorenti said their stepfather was arrested at Superior Court.

“His boss called. He said he couldn’t do anything, nothing — everybody had the handcuffs on.”