

Houston Shipley raid first in broad crackdown

By stepping up arrests, experts say, officials aim to force reform of immigration laws

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Families are in hiding. Immigrants are lining up lawyers in case of arrest. Business leaders are nervous, and activists are outraged.

It's part of the dramatic fallout from an immigration raid last week on a Shipley Do-Nuts warehouse complex, the first such raid in Houston since early last year.

"A lot of the undocumented are afraid of going out on the street where you might get picked up," said Alma Baladez, a legal Mexican immigrant who lives by the northside Shipley complex. "They don't go out with the same tranquility."

That peace could be rocked even further as immigration experts and government officials warn that more raids are looming — raids increasingly designed to force employers into complying with laws.

Kevin Lachus, a former Immigration and Customs Enforcement attorney, expects worksite investigations and immigration raids to increase significantly across the U.S. and especially in Houston.

As a government attorney, Lachus was involved in sweeping raids on the Swift & Company packing plants in 2006.

He and others say stepped-up worksite enforcement raids are part of a Department of Homeland Security strategy to force a revival of last year's failed effort to reform the nation's immigration laws. The idea is that disruptions caused by raids would unite business interests and immigration hard-liners to convince legislators to reconsider immigration reform.

Lachus, a lawyer with the Tindall & Foster immigration law firm in Houston, expects 150 raids across the country this year, up from 48 last year.

Employers warned

DHS officials, meanwhile, appear to be toughening their warnings against employers.

"We're serious about enforcing the law. You will see more raids, you will see more interior enforcement," said Laura Keehner, the assistant DHS press secretary at agency headquarters in Washington, D.C. "Those employers who knowingly employ illegal aliens should either give it up, or watch out, because that is certainly a focus of ours."

Demetrios Papademetriou, president of the Migration Policy Institute, an immigration think tank in Washington, D.C., said Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff is keeping his vow to get tough after last summer's defeat of the immigration reform effort in Congress.

"This is a part of a very consistent and persistent policy on the part of the administration to follow the policy they outlined after the reform bill failed last year," Papademetriou said. "The White House and Chertoff said certain things, and the highlight was they were going to enforce the law aggressively and systematically."

Part of the plan is to inflict maximum pain on business owners, several experts said, noting that ICE investigations now frequently target company owners, managers and supervisors along with undocumented workers.

Worksite criminal arrests by ICE increased dramatically to 863 in 2007 from 176 in fiscal year 2005, up 490 percent, according to the agency. Those arrests include employers, managers and workers.

Eli Kantor, an immigration lawyer and media liaison for the 11,000-member American Immigration Lawyers Association, said the immigration crackdown is "all politics, all show."

"They're now going after the big shots," Kantor said. "They're arresting the owners of businesses, the human resource directors, and even the union business agents for allegedly conspiring to provide false employment authorizations. So they really want to put the fear of God into companies."

Effect on local economy

Wednesday's raid at Shipley Do-Nuts is the beginning of an exhaustive criminal investigation of the company's hiring practices, ICE officials said.

But the raid was just one of 11 conducted by ICE agents last Wednesday, including seven against Mexican restaurants in New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio. The owner of the restaurant chain and nine of his managers were arrested on criminal charges.

"Employers who exploit illegal alien labor to reap greater profits for themselves can expect to pay a high price for their greed," said a statement from Julie L. Meyers, the ICE assistant secretary. "Whether the violator is a multinational corporation or a small business, ICE is aggressively targeting employers who use illegal alien workers to gain an unfair business advantage and take jobs away from legal workers."

Many are worried that aggressive enforcement will harm the Houston area's robust economy, where an estimated 250,000 undocumented workers are employed.

"If these workers can't be hired, the prices of the goods we buy will go up dramatically," said Rice University sociologist Stephen Klineburg. "That's why the business community

in this city is united in calling to an end to these raids, and for complete immigration reform."

Laws on the books

While the future impact of immigration enforcement is debated, the real-world effects were felt immediately here.

During the Shipley raid, family members of several detained workers who lived in the company housing complex hurriedly fled.

"They left with only the clothes they had on — they didn't take anything, because they were scared and wanted to leave," said Baladez, the Shipley neighbor.

On Friday, U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Houston, and immigrant advocacy groups called on the Bush administration to halt the raids.

"It is important for us to call for a moratorium on this method of immigration reform and enforcement," Jackson Lee said. "We need to have a system in place, even if it is a temporary status card, to address the crisis we have."

Jackson Lee noted that Pope Benedict XVI, in his visit to Washington, D.C., last week, praised the role immigrants have played and called on them to be treated humanely.

In Washington, DHS' Keehner said the raids will continue.

"Secretary (Chertoff) was one of the proponents of a regulated system for current illegal workers who are here, and we recognize the potential economic impact (of the raids), but we must enforce the laws that are on the book," she said.

Activists are giving immigrants a "Constitutional Rights Card" they can give to ICE agents if they are detained. The card explains the immigrant will not answer any questions and asks that they be allowed to contact local legal clinics.

Fernando Alavres, an attorney with CRECEN, a Houston immigrant rights group, said his advice is to remain silent and have a lawyer ready.