

Immigration crackdown at UPS plants nets 51 workers

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U.S. immigration officials Wednesday arrested 51 immigrants at two UPS warehouses in Auburn where authorities believe they were illegally employed.

The workers, from Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, were being held at the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma while their immigration cases are reviewed and processed.

The workers were discovered after Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents audited the employment records of UPS Supply Chain Solutions, a UPS subsidiary that operates the warehouses, and of Spherion, a temporary-employment agency that helped staff the facilities.

Officials said the audit showed several workers had used counterfeit identification documents, including fraudulent Social Security numbers, to get jobs.

ICE spokeswoman Lorie Dankers said that while most of those arrested had been placed by Spherion, headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., some told agents they had been placed at UPS by other employment agencies. None of the companies has been criminally charged, and ICE is continuing its investigation, Dankers said.

Kip Havel, Spherion spokesman, said the company is "taking this matter very seriously. We are looking into the situation and fully cooperating with authorities."

Spokeswoman Susan Rosenberg said UPS will conduct its own investigation. "UPS has policies regarding unauthorized employment for ourselves and any contractors that we work with," she said.

UPS processes a variety of customer orders at the two warehouses, which sit side by side on C Street Northwest in Auburn. The facilities are considered "Customs bonded," a classification granted to security-sensitive facilities where shipments of merchandise, subject to duty, are stored before being processed and moved to other locations.

Wednesday's arrests are part of a crackdown on work sites nationwide, particularly those tied to security-sensitive institutions such as airports, military bases and Customs-bonded warehouses.

Officials say illegal-immigrant workers with access to such sites are vulnerable to exploitation by terrorists and other criminals.

Last year, work-site crackdowns led to the arrest to 4,383 illegal immigrants, including 718 on criminal charges. The number was more than three times those arrested the previous year.

Dankers said officials will consider a number of factors in processing and detaining those arrested.

"If they have dependent children or special needs, a supervisor will make the final determination about whether that individual will remain in custody or other arrangements are made to ensure his or her appearance before a judge.

"We're not taking individuals away from dependent children."