

West Coast mayors decry immigration raids

June 20, 2008

USA TODAY

By Emily Bazar

Three West Coast mayors are asking the leaders of other cities to take a stand against workplace immigration raids that they say hurt local economies and may force companies to relocate.

At the annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors this week in Miami, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums and Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels will ask their colleagues to challenge how the government raids businesses in search of illegal workers.

They want Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to focus on businesses that exploit workers, such as those that violate wage and safety laws, not "responsible employers" that contribute to economies, their resolution says.

"We've never taken the position that you shouldn't enforce the law," Villaraigosa says. "What we've said is, in a time of limited resources, we should prioritize our enforcement. At a time when we don't have the resources to go after criminals, we're going after legitimate businesses and workers instead. That doesn't make sense."

The resolution will be discussed by a committee Saturday and, if approved, will go to all the mayors for a vote Monday.

ICE has aggressively ramped up workplace arrests in the past five years. Last year, it charged 863 people with criminal violations such as identity theft and 4,077 for being in the country illegally. In 2002, it made 25 criminal and 485 immigration arrests.

"We fully respect the opinions of local leaders and will continue to work with them," agency spokeswoman Kelly Nantel says. But she says ICE has a duty to enforce immigration law "that we take very seriously."

"Sometimes we find employers with their illegal workforce in deplorable, substandard conditions, and that's not acceptable," Nantel says. "Employers who harbor illegal aliens are inherently mistreating those aliens for their own financial gain.." She says ICE refers suspected violations to state or federal law enforcement agencies. Last year, ICE was responsible for charges against 92 employers.

Villaraigosa wants his colleagues to adopt the resolution because "mayors all over the country have to deal with the consequences of a broken immigration system," such as businesses taking a severe economic hit if they're raided, says spokeswoman Jazmin Ortega.

Mark Boughton, mayor of Danbury, Conn., also says the immigration system needs fixing, but he believes communities should help ICE enforce laws. He is a member of the mayors conference but won't attend the meeting.

"To encourage ICE not to enforce the law is irresponsible and goes against good public policy," he says.

If raids continue, Villaraigosa says, regional economies will suffer.

In February, ICE raided Micro Solutions Enterprises, a Van Nuys, Calif., company that recycles printer cartridges, arresting 138 suspected illegal immigrants out of about 700 workers at that plant.

Chief financial officer Nitin Dhopade says the company lost millions after the raid because of reduced productivity, fewer sales and customers, and increased shipping costs to make up for delays.

He says the effects will ripple into the broader economy.

Barbara Coe, chairwoman of the California Coalition for Immigration Reform, which works to raise awareness of illegal immigration, counters that raids don't hurt the economy, illegal immigrants do.

Some employers hire illegal immigrants instead of legal workers so they can pay them lower wages, she says. "Cheap labor is the bottom line," she says. "There are American workers who will fill those jobs in a heartbeat."