

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Bus companies accused of immigrant smuggling

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TARGETED COMPANIES

Immigration officials charged 22 people working for local companies with conspiracy to transport illegal immigrants. The companies include:

- **Transportes Tres Estrellas de Oro:** 7700 block of Park Place Boulevard
- **Transportes Banda:** 5600 block of Harrisburg Boulevard
- **Transportes Medrano and Amigo:** 6320 Harrisburg Boulevard
- **Transportes Sarahi:** 7400 block of Tuck Street
- **Transportes Los Plebes:** 500 block of Wayside Drive
- **El Pionero Van Tours:** 5500 block of East Mount Houston
- **Super Express Van Tours:** 7200 block of Long Drive

Source: Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Federal agents have targeted more than a dozen local bus companies they say shuttled scores of illegal immigrants to destinations across the U.S., vowing to continue cracking down on smuggling organizations' transportation networks.

ICE Assistant Secretary John Morton was in Houston on Wednesday to announce results of a three-month operation focused on Houston- area smuggling by transportation companies, saying federal agents charged 22 suspects with conspiracy to transport illegal immigrants.

Federal agents executed nine search warrants Tuesday morning and targeted 14 businesses, including one on the city's southeast side that Morton said used armed guards and pit bulls to hold passengers in a stash house before they were smuggled on to their final destinations.

“Houston, unfortunately, has become a hub for these illegal transportation companies,” the ICE official said.

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“We are taking on the whole industry,” he said.

He said the businesses investigated in the ICE operation were not legitimate transportation companies, but worked exclusively with smuggling organizations. The companies charged illegal immigrants “exorbitant” fees — up to \$650 for a one-way bus ticket, he said, and transported illegal immigrants from Houston throughout the United States, to places such as Miami, Washington D.C., New Jersey and New York.

Morton said the companies avoided major highways that were likely to be patrolled by law enforcement, and traveled primarily at night. The companies paid commissions to smugglers, typically \$200 to \$300 each, to bring the smuggled immigrants to them, and would buy and trade passengers for fees, authorities said.

“These companies didn't treat their passengers as persons, but rather as commodities to be bought and sold,” Morton said.

Ed Gallagher, the deputy criminal chief for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Houston, described the crackdown on the transportation companies as a large-scale operation.

He said the 22 criminal defendants were charged with conspiracy to transport illegal immigrants, which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

ICE officials also made 81 administrative arrests of suspected illegal immigrants during Tuesday's raids of the transportation businesses, which are located primarily in east and southeast Houston. The suspected illegal immigrants found at the companies were placed in deportation proceedings, federal officials said.

Kevin Lashus, a former assistant chief counsel for ICE who is now in private practice, said the shift toward targeting the smuggling transportation network — rather than a single driver or van load of illegal immigrants — is significant.

The Obama administration has stepped up inspections of companies' employment paperwork since last year, and now appears to be going after those involved in the logistics of smuggling, he said.

He said by targeting first the driver of a transportation company and then the owner for prosecution, investigators can move up the smuggling chain.

“It's a classic shakedown,” Lashus said. “But they're not just going after the employers — they're going after the transportation system, the underground trafficking routes that are used in Southern Texas and in Houston.”

Several of the companies raided on Tuesday appeared to be vacant on Wednesday. The sign outside one of the alleged stash houses on Harrisburg Boulevard advertised that the building is for lease.

Down the street, an alleged stash house near the railroad tracks was locked off behind a black wrought-iron fence.

A sign reading *Bienvenidos* — “Welcome” in Spanish — adorned an empty office in a converted trailer at a third targeted company.