

Crackdown Resumes on Firms' Illegal Hires

By Miriam Jordan

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The Obama administration has extended its crackdown on employers of illegal immigrants, notifying 500 companies across the nation in recent weeks that the government will inspect their hiring records.

The surge in so-called silent raids is the first to occur in the government's new fiscal year, which began Oct. 1. In the year ended Sept. 30, the U.S. audited 2,496 companies, topping the previous year's tally of 2,196.

"Feels like this will be a tough haul," said DeAnne Hilgers, a Minnesota attorney whose audited clients include companies in publishing, food service and construction.

The audits of employee records by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, can lead firms to lose large numbers of employees and face lower productivity and steep legal fees.

The audits can result in civil and criminal penalties. Companies can be fined, barred from competing for government contracts and be hit with criminal charges of knowingly employing illegal workers and evading taxes.

An ICE spokeswoman confirmed that employers across the U.S. had been asked to turn over their I-9 employment-eligibility forms and other documents to the agency.

"These inspections are designed to determine whether or not the businesses are violating U.S. employment laws by hiring unauthorized workers," she said.

ICE didn't name the businesses being investigated.

Unlike prior enforcement actions, this one wasn't announced by the Obama administration, a sign that it is wary of drawing attention to any policy that could upset Hispanic voters ahead of the 2012 elections. Polls have shown that Hispanics are disappointed with the lack of progress toward overhauling the nation's immigration system.

"I could understand why they don't make noise about this audit," said Daniel Costa, immigration policy analyst for the Economic Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank. "A year away from an election, every single decision of this type is made through a political lens."

About 11 million illegal immigrants live in the U.S., with roughly two-thirds of them employed, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, a research group. Workers often use a fake Social Security number or the identity of a legal resident or citizen to secure work.

Chipotle Mexican Grill, which owns and operates nearly 1,100 outlets, has let go of hundreds of workers since an audit that began last year in Minnesota and stretched to Virginia and Washington, D.C.

"The I-9 audits disrupt farmers and workers, but do nothing to move us towards the goal of a legal and stable work force," said Dan Fazio, director of the Washington Farm Labor Association.

Since January 2009, ICE has audited more than 5,909 employers suspected of hiring illegal labor and imposed more than \$72 million in sanctions.

The Obama administration has made employers the focus of its efforts to curb illegal immigration. The strategy is regarded as an effort by President Barack Obama to show he is tackling illegal immigration. Mr. Obama favors a sweeping overhaul of immigration law that would put many illegal immigrants on the path to legal residency.

But the audit strategy has been attacked by foes of illegal immigration who say it doesn't result in the deportation of workers, who they contend find other jobs that should go to American citizens.

Advocates for immigrants say the audits force workers to leave well-paying jobs with benefits for lower-paying positions in the underground economy.

"I-9 audits are doing little or nothing to solve our nation's immigration problem. What they do is put good employers on edge and halt efforts to grow or expand businesses at a time when we need them to grow," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group.

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