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Immigration agency offers companies training in exchange for audits

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The agent from U.S. Immigration and Enforcement called human resources director Debra Kabalkin out of the blue with a novel pitch: Will you let us audit your employee records if we teach you how to detect false identification cards and phony paperwork?

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It was an unusual offer, but Interstate Worldwide Relocation Services of Springfield was willing to give it a try. Under a new partnership with ICE, known as the IMAGE program, federal agents would help educate employers on how to reduce the chance of hiring illegal workers. The businesses had to agree to undergo a voluntary audit and use an electronic database to verify records.

Inviting the government to look at company records didn't scare off Interstate's president, Bud Morrissette. With more than 200 employees and a roughly 50 percent vacancy rate among the movers, drivers, packers and other service positions in the company, Morrissette said he welcomed the chance to learn directly from federal officials how to screen and hire for legal employees.

"We want to get it right the first time," Morrissette said. The company, a third-generation family business, has corporate officers in Springfield and facilities in Ashburn and Landover. It handles storage and shipping for corporate and government clients, including AOL, Hewlett Packard and the military.

After months of training with ICE officials and a complete audit, Interstate plans to formally sign an agreement with ICE on Wednesday, making it the fifth company in the Washington region to be certified as a member of IMAGE (ICE Mutual Agreement Between Government and Employers).

More than 100 companies nationwide are members.

Working directly with businesses to help them follow federal law is a collaborative approach more commonly seen among local law enforcement agencies using community policing. But in a time of shrinking resources and an ever-expanding mission to protect the homeland, federal law enforcement is working with additional groups for their help in fighting crime.

John P. Torres, special agent in charge of ICE's Washington field office, wanted to expand the IMAGE program when he arrived more than a year ago and pushed to have ICE agents reach out to businesses to lead the training.

"We're looking for enforcement," he said. "And the benefit to ICE is that it allows us to use our limited resources to focus on the most egregious violators."