

New Houston task force to fight immigration fraud

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Aug. 26, 2009

Immigration officials on Wednesday announced plans to create a task force to crack down what they described as a tremendous local problem — immigration document and benefit fraud.

“We've noticed a tremendous amount of document and benefit fraud occurring within the greater Houston area,” said Pat McElwain, the assistant special agent in charge for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Houston and head of the newly created task force.

The task force is still forming, and ICE officials are talking to other federal agencies, such as the U.S. Attorney's Office, and local agencies including the Houston Police Department and Harris County Sheriff's Office about participation, McElwain said.

Gregory Palmore, an ICE spokesman, said ICE does not have statistics available on document fraud in Houston, and could not go into details about cases locally that are under investigation.

Nationally, ICE has 17 fraudulent document task forces up and running that have been credited with a number of high-profile cases, McElwain said, from Chicago to New Jersey to Los Angeles.

He said a recent case in Houston, the prosecution of former immigration attorney Kenneth Rothey, who pleaded guilty to involvement in an elaborate visa fraud scam, is a good example of the type of case that will be targeted by the new task force.

McElwain said common types of immigration fraud detected in Houston include everything from fraudulent Social Security cards to driver's licenses to birth certificates. In immigration benefit fraud cases, he said, investigators have caught people applying for citizenship or green cards lying on their applications, and omitting important facts, such as a criminal record.

ICE's first fraudulent document task force dates to 2006. Also on Wednesday, ICE officials announced the creation of a fraud task force in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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