

El Paso Times

ICE audit plan for employers includes El Paso, draws criticism from rights group

By Isabel A. Rodriguez

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EL PASO -- At least 41 businesses in El Paso will be part of a national audit of 1,000 businesses by federal officials looking for immigration violations in hiring workers.

The audit will be among the biggest in El Paso by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a move that drew immediate criticism from a local immigrant-rights group.

The local businesses chosen for audits were not named, but the agency said on its Web site that all the businesses selected for inspection were the "result of investigative leads and intelligence and connection to public safety and national security."

The Border Network for Human Rights, based in El Paso, opposed the audits.

"We are saddened and disappointed that two years after the disastrous 2007 immigration raids that tore apart families and penalized American businesses, the federal government is once again adopting a shortsighted enforcement-only approach to immigration policy," the group said in a prepared statement.

The group also said the federal government should concentrate its efforts on fighting crimes along the border such as drug trafficking and gang activity instead of "harassing hardworking families and business owners."

Of the 1,000 businesses nationwide, 161 are in Texas. In addition to the ones in El Paso, there are about 60 in the San Antonio area and 40 in the Houston area.

When the audits will take place and how they will be conducted has not been announced.

"ICE is focused on finding and penalizing employers who believe they can unfairly get ahead by cultivating illegal workplaces," ICE Assistant Secretary John Morton said on the agency's Web site.

According to The Associated Press, dairy farmers in Vermont were among the businesses getting notifications from immigration officials to turn over payroll and hiring records, said Kelly Loftus, spokeswoman for the Vermont Agency of Agriculture.

Some dairy farmers say they use foreign workers because it is hard to find people locally for the work.

Richard Dayoub, president and CEO of the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, said, "They (ICE) are really taking an effort by their part to understand the depth of the problem. I'm not sure what they will accomplish."

At the same time, the Homeland Security Department announced it would give a seal of approval to businesses volunteering to use an electronic program to check workers' immigration status.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said Thursday that the public should know which companies are following the law. The problem is that the program known as E-Verify is still under development, and the law does not require employers to use it. They are required to use a paper system.

E-Verify is an Internet-based system that allows employers to voluntarily determine the eligibility of new hires to work in the United States, using information provided on the employee's I-9 form.

The E-Verify campaign is being promoted by ICE as a way to help employers maintain a legal work environment.

"All employers have an obligation to assure that they have a work force that complies with the law," El Paso Mayor John Cook said. "They E-Verify system will implement technology to assist employers with that responsibility."

Cindy Ramos-Davidson, CEO of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said she felt that the E-Verify system was not up to speed, and that all it took was one small error to set up a business for litigation.

The last nationwide audit conducted by ICE resulted in 14,000 suspicious documents.

The Border Network for Human Rights said in its statement that it "hopes that the Obama administration will rethink this outdated strategy and keep his campaign promise to implement comprehensive immigration reform."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.