

ICE executes federal search warrant at Palm Springs bakery in ongoing probe
Current and former manager charged criminally; 51 workers arrested on immigration violations

September 11, 2008

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. - U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents executed a federal search warrant at a local baking company here today, arresting a current and former company supervisor on criminal charges and 51 other workers on administrative immigration violations.

The arrests and the execution of the search warrant at the Palm Springs Baking Company on Montalvo Way are part of an ongoing probe by ICE that began in 2006 after ICE received a tip that the business was allegedly hiring illegal alien workers.

The two individuals facing federal prosecution are charged in a criminal complaint with one count of continuing to employ an unauthorized alien. Margarita Avilez Hernandez, 52, who currently works as a supervisor for the Palm Springs Baking Company, was taken into custody by ICE agents at the bakery this morning. Alicia Ramirez, 36, who formerly worked as a supervisor for the business, was arrested this afternoon. Both women are expected to make their initial appearance in federal court in Riverside, Calif., later today. The maximum penalty for the misdemeanor charge is six months in prison and a \$3,000 fine for each unauthorized alien.

According to the affidavit filed in support of the criminal arrest warrants, local law enforcement alerted ICE in 2006 that the Palm Springs Baking Company allegedly guaranteed employment to illegal aliens in exchange for a payment of approximately \$3,000 for each worker. During the ensuing investigation, ICE agents submitted the names and Social Security numbers of more than 130 of the company's employees for verification and were advised that more than 100 of those numbers were invalid or did not match the accompanying name.

"No business regardless of size or type is above the law," said Robert Schoch, special agent in charge of the ICE Office of Investigations in Los Angeles. "Businesses that use illegal alien labor not only rob lawful residents and U.S. citizens of job opportunities, they also often exploit unauthorized foreign workers to gain an unfair economic advantage over their competition."

In addition to the criminal arrests, ICE agents encountered 51 workers (31 women and 20 men) at the bakery who were found to be in the United States illegally. The group included nationals from three countries - Mexico (49), Guatemala (1) and Honduras (1). The individuals arrested on administrative immigration violations are being photographed, fingerprinted and processed by ICE.

They are also being interviewed to elicit information about possible health, caregiver or other humanitarian issues, and to identify any urgent medical needs. The information aids

ICE in making decisions about whether to detain an individual or permit a conditional humanitarian release.

As a result of those interviews, 27 of the illegal alien workers encountered at the baking company today have been detained. The majority will be transferred to the ICE contract detention facility in Lancaster, Calif., operated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. The remaining 24 illegal workers are being processed and will be released on humanitarian grounds while they await a future immigration hearing.

Since ICE was established in March 2003, it has dramatically enhanced its efforts to combat the unlawful employment of illegal aliens in this country. So far this fiscal year (Sept. 30, 2007 through Aug. 30, 2008), ICE has made 1,070 criminal arrests tied to worksite enforcement investigations. Of those, 123 are owners, managers, supervisors or human resources employees accused of violations ranging from alien harboring to knowingly hiring illegal aliens. The remaining criminal defendants are workers arrested on charges including aggravated identity theft and Social Security fraud. ICE has also made approximately 4,700 administrative arrests for immigration violations during worksite enforcement operations this fiscal year.

To help employers build a legal workforce, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced a new initiative called the ICE Mutual Agreement between Government and Employers or IMAGE. IMAGE is designed to build cooperative relationships between the government and businesses, strengthen hiring practices, and reduce the unlawful employment of illegal aliens. The initiative also seeks to gain greater industry compliance and corporate due diligence through enhanced training and education of employers. ICE strongly encourages employers to review IMAGE program materials available at www.ICE.gov.

-- ICE --
