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Rebranding at ICE meant to soften immigration enforcement agency's image

By Andrew Becker

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement will realign its duties to promote criminal investigations over immigrant deportation, officials have announced.

By streamlining and renaming several offices, officials hope to highlight the agency's counterterrorism, money laundering and other complex criminal investigations and in the process "re-brand" ICE, turning the public -- and political -- spotlight away from its immigration work.

ICE Assistant Secretary John Morton said that immigration enforcement remains a top priority but that the intention of the image makeover is to show the agency's "true face."

"Public perception is dominated by civil immigration enforcement responsibilities, even though half of the agency is devoted to something else," Morton said recently after announcing the changes to ICE employees. "We're not going to get away from immigration. It's very important from a national security perspective."

The realignment also aims to address ICE's identity crisis, which the agency has struggled with for years. Morton said in an e-mail to employees that one of his priorities "was to give a clearer sense of identity and focus."

The agency will have a new reporting alignment with three main directorates: investigations, immigration and management. ICE will consolidate its civil immigration duties into a new Enforcement and Removal Operations division. The office, formerly known as detention and removal operations, took the brunt of criticism.

Immigration advocates have expressed skepticism about an agency trying to rehabilitate its image without first making substantive changes. They say ICE is stricter than it was under the previous administration with enforcement, and problems persist with immigration detention. Most of the \$5.5 billion in discretionary funds for ICE's 2011 budget request pays for efforts to lock up and deport immigrants.

"ICE has more than a branding problem. You can't rebrand yourself out of a misallocation of resources," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum. Noorani hopes "ICE is doing stuff about stopping terrorists," he said, "but the public doesn't know about it. The public only knows ICE is going after immigrants."

Worksite raids and neighborhood sweeps that targeted illegal immigrants have helped shape ICE's image. The agency is hounded, too, by reports of poor treatment of noncitizens in ICE custody and allegations that the agency's rigid policies break up immigrant families. The agency has faced criticism over medical care for detainees, hiding the truth about deaths in detention and setting quotas for deportations.

In recent months, the White House has hosted several meetings with immigration advocates frustrated with ICE. The Obama administration has vowed to reform the nation's immigration detention system.

Efforts to overhaul the detention network, which locks up about 30,000 immigrants nightly in hundreds of federal, contract and local jails nationwide, have hit snags. Shortly after the reforms were announced last year, the first director of the new office to oversee the changes left the agency.

Moreover, there's a fundamental inconsistency as the administration pursues immigration reform while ICE still deports 1,100 people daily, said Marshall Fitz, director of immigration policy at the Center for American Progress

"Obama is the face of promise and also the face of deportations," he said. "ICE can make all the policy changes they want at the headquarters level, but out in the field is a different story."

Liberals aren't alone in raising concerns. Conservatives and ICE's own agents have blasted the agency over immigration enforcement, saying that the agency isn't tough enough. They say the "realignment" signals a further shift in the Obama administration's approach to immigration.

"Far too much is at stake for ICE to neglect every tool at their disposal for the sake of rebranding their image," said Rep. Harold Rogers (Ky.), the ranking Republican on the House Appropriations subcommittee for homeland security.

Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-Tex.), chairman of the House Homeland Security subcommittee on the border, maritime and global counterterrorism, said ICE needs additional funding as more special agents are needed to investigate border crimes. About 20 percent of ICE's resources are dedicated to the border, Morton said.

But conservatives remain unsatisfied with such efforts, which have led to Arizona's controversial law SB1070 and calls for more Border Patrol agents. Obama has said he will send up to 1,200 National Guard troops to the border.

Morton said the realigned agency will continue to conduct criminal immigration investigations, such as worksite enforcement, national security and visa abuse.

But, according to the agency's 2011 congressional budget request, ICE projects that 80 percent of detained immigrants will be criminals, captured by fugitive teams or found in prisons and jails. The rest will primarily come from apprehensions of illegal border crossers. Last year, only 6 percent of the detainee population was booked by ICE's office of investigations.

To burnish the agency's image, ICE officials are considering a strategy that has helped the FBI for years: the aid of Hollywood and other venues of popular culture. Timothy Calkins, a marketing professor at Northwestern University, said such efforts could be squandered if internal problems aren't addressed.

"Public relations is such an important part of branding," he said. "They could go out and say 'we do all this cool stuff' with ad campaigns, and a Hollywood push, but if stories that come out don't support that, the rebranding program isn't going to work."