

Staffing shortage temporarily closes Sushi Zushi restaurants

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Austin's two Sushi Zushi restaurants have temporarily shut down and might not reopen for a week or more after a number of employees reportedly walked off the job when they learned the business was the focus of a federal immigration audit, a company spokeswoman said.

The Sushi Zushi locations on West Fifth Street and at the Domain are among eight across Texas that closed over the weekend due to a shortage of workers, spokeswoman Judy McCarter said.

The company employs about 500 people statewide, McCarter said, including about 100 in the Austin area. She said it wasn't clear how many local employees failed to report for work as scheduled.

"Enough people stayed away that they had no choice," McCarter said.

The audit of Sushi Zushi's I-9 employment eligibility verification forms by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was routine, McCarter said, and the restaurant complies with "all federal, state and local regulations."

Businesses use I-9 forms to determine whether a prospective employee is eligible to work in the United States.

"They received a notice from the government requesting some additional information, and somehow that word got out," she said. "This was a reaction to rumors as opposed to any official company communication."

Sushi Zushi was given 60 days to supply the requested information, McCarter said.

A San Antonio-based Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokeswoman said the agency could "neither confirm nor deny the existence of ongoing investigations."

In a statement, the agency said: "U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) conducts routine I-9 employer audits as part of HSI's overall strategy to promote compliance with the law and deter illegal employment. These inspections determine if the audited businesses are compliant with U.S. employment laws."

Sushi Zushi is working to fill vacancies so it can reopen all eight restaurants, McCarter said. Some locations could be back in business as soon as next week, likely with limited menus while new workers are trained.

Numerous ads have already been posted online, searching for sushi chefs, cooks and dishwashers. Pay for sushi chefs is \$12 to \$16 per hour plus tips, according to the postings, while cooks make \$10 to \$14 and dishwashers earn \$8 an hour.

"They've already had an absolute flurry of interest," McCarter said.

While Sushi Zushi is closed, McCarter said, managers have kept many employees on the payroll by having them help with cleaning, filing and other tasks.

<http://www.statesman.com/business/staffing-shortage-temporarily-closes-sushi-zushi-restaurants-2425743.html>