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IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS AUDIT MORE THAN 100 CALIFORNIA BUSINESSES

ICE delivers notices require employers to show detailed employee records

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Federal immigration officials are auditing 122 Southern California businesses, demanding proof their employees have legal permission to work in the U.S.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement hand-delivered audit notices to the businesses during the past week. The notices from the agency's Homeland Security Investigations unit require employers to show the government detailed records of who works there and evidence they are authorized to work.

It is the second large-scale workplace enforcement effort in California since the start of the year, and comes as businesses here feel increasingly squeezed by federal and state immigration laws.

ICE officials said notices were served at businesses in varying industries and that no specific industry was targeted.

By law, the businesses have three days to compile their records but ICE said many businesses issued audit notices this week were given as much as a week to comply with the document requests.

ICE declined to provide the names of any businesses targeted this week. The Los Angeles Times, which first reported the audits, said at least two trucking businesses were given inspection notices.

The latest effort follows audits at 77 businesses in Northern California in recent weeks and nearly 100 7-Eleven convenience stores around the country, including California.

Thomas Homan, ICE's deputy director, has said his agency is planning to dramatically increase workplace enforcement of immigration laws this year as part of a broader effort by the Trump administration to crack down on illegal immigration.

A 1986 law signed by President Ronald Reagan that granted legal status to roughly three million immigrants living in the country illegally also made it illegal to employ people who don't have the government's permission to work in the U.S.

That law requires employers to maintain employment records, including an I-9 form that certifies an employee is allowed to work in the U.S.

During the last budget year that ended in September, ICE audited I-9 records at 1,360 businesses. That year the government said several businesses were ordered to pay a combined \$97.6 million in fines, forfeitures and restitution.

Mr. Homan has said ICE agents would investigate businesses around the country, but the weeklong effort in Southern California comes in the wake of a new California law requiring employers to ask immigration agents for warrants or subpoenas before allowing them access to private areas of the workplace or confidential employee records.

After news reports of the visits to 7-Eleven stores, and administrative arrests of people suspected of being in the country illegally, Democratic California Attorney General Xavier Becerra warned business owners that they had to abide by the state law or potentially face hefty fines.

He said in a news conference earlier this year that employers who “voluntarily start giving up information about their employees in ways that contradict our new California laws, they subject themselves to actions by my office.”

In a separate operation, ICE deportation officers arrested 212 immigrants across Southern California this week. The agency had been looking for about 400 people, most of whom officials said are convicted criminals or people who have been previously deported or ordered out of the country by a judge.

Seventeen immigrants not being sought by officers were arrested in the weeklong operation, ICE said.

Mr. Homan has said his officers would target California as part of the administration’s crackdown on illegal immigration and so-called sanctuary jurisdictions that limit cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

Last year, Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, signed law broadly limiting when and how local authorities around the state can cooperate with Mr. Homan’s agency. A 2014 law generally bars local jails in the state from working with ICE officers looking to arrest immigrants before they are released.

“Because sanctuary jurisdictions like Los Angeles prevent ICE from arresting criminal aliens in the secure confines of a jail,” Mr. Homan said, “our officers are forced to conduct at-large arrests in the community, putting officers, the general public and the aliens at greater risk and increasing the incidents of collateral arrests.”

Immigration advocates have decried the government’s enforcement operations as casting too wide a net and arresting people whose only offense is being in the U.S. illegally.