

Shredder Ended Work Backlog, U.S. Says

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Body

Tens of thousands of pieces of mail come into the huge Immigration and Naturalization Service data processing center in Laguna Niguel, Calif., every day, and as at so many government agencies, it tends to pile up. One manager there had a system to get rid of the vexing backlog, federal officials say. This week the manager was charged with illegally shredding as many as 90,000 documents.

Among the destroyed papers, federal officials charged, were American and foreign passports, applications for asylum, birth certificates and other documents supporting applications for citizenship, visas and work permits.

The manager, Dawn Randall, 24, was indicted late Wednesday by a federal grand jury, along with a supervisor working under her, Leonel Salazar, 34. They are accused of ordering low-level workers to destroy thousands of documents from last February to April to reduce a growing backlog of unprocessed paperwork.

Ms. Randall was the file room manager at the I.N.S. center. Mr. Salazar was her file room supervisor. The Laguna Niguel center handles paperwork for residents of California, Arizona, Nevada, Hawaii and Guam and is one of four immigration service centers around the country operated by private contractors under I.N.S. supervision.

According to the federal indictment, Ms. Randall ordered her subordinates last January to count the number of unprocessed papers in the filing center. They reported that about 90,000 documents were waiting to be handled. In February, the government says, she ordered at least five night-shift workers to begin shredding many boxes of papers.

By the end of March, the backlog had been cut to zero, and Ms. Randall ordered her subordinates to continue destroying incoming paper to keep current, the government says.

"There was no I.N.S. policy that required this, nor was she ordered to do it by any superior, as far as we know," said Greg Staples, the assistant United States attorney handling the case. "The only motive we can think of is just the obvious one of a manager trying to get rid of a nettlesome problem."

Mr. Staples said one frustrating thing about the case was that most of the evidence had been carted out with the trash and that it was impossible to identify all of the victims.

"It's like a murder case without a body," he said. "We will never really know what was destroyed."

The shredding was discovered in April by an agency supervisor who witnessed what appeared to be unauthorized destruction of documents. The I.N.S. office of internal audit, the Justice Department's inspector general and the United States attorney's office for Southern California conducted the investigation that led to this week's indictments.

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Ms. Randall and Mr. Salazar were each charged with conspiracy and five counts of willfully destroying documents filed with the I.N.S. The conspiracy charge carries a maximum penalty of five years in federal prison. Each of the other counts can bring three years in prison.

Their subordinates were not charged because they were low-level workers acting on instructions, the government said.

After the shredding was discovered, the immigration service opened a hotline for people who suspected their paperwork had been destroyed. Agency officials helped petitioners reconstruct their files and gave applicants the benefit of the doubt if they could not replace the documents they had submitted, said Lori Haley, a spokeswoman for the I.N.S's western regional office.

She said the agency made an effort last year to publicize the problem and was confident that it had rebuilt most of the lost files. She also said that additional staff members had been hired at the center and that oversight had been tightened.

"Monitoring of the activities of the support services contractor has been enhanced at the service center," Ms. Haley said. "All materials to be shredded or destroyed are reviewed first by I.N.S personnel to make sure that no unauthorized materials are destroyed."

Ms. Randall's lawyer, Joseph G. Cavallo, said today that he had not read the charges and would not comment. He said, however, that Ms. Randall would plead not guilty at her arraignment on Monday. Mr. Salazar's lawyer, Tom Brown, did not return calls seeking comment.

The four document processing centers are operated under a \$325 million contract with JHM Research and Development of Maryland, which in turn subcontracts the operations to two other companies. John Macklin, president of JHM, was unavailable for comment.

Mr. Staples, the federal prosecutor, said the contractors were cooperating with the investigation and would not be charged unless more evidence against them was developed.

"If we had found criminal liability, we would have indicted the companies," he said.

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