

More employers join immigration program

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Body

ATLANTA - In the last few months, the roster of companies in a revamped, voluntary immigration enforcement program has expanded by nearly one-fifth as the administration of President Barack Obama steps up employer audits.

It may seem counterintuitive for a company to voluntarily open its books to the scrutiny of federal agents, but officials with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement say the benefits of its IMAGE program can include lower fines and can enhance a company's image.

"We need IMAGE because an enforcement-only approach isn't going to produce the best results," said ICE Director John Morton.

The acronym stands for ICE Mutual Agreement between Government and Employers. Officials say it can reduce the employment of illegal immigrants and the use of fake identification documents.

To participate, employers must meet several requirements: enroll in the federal E-Verify program; submit to an ICE audit of their I-9 forms that new employees complete and related documents; establish a written hiring and employment verification policy that includes a yearly internal audit; and sign a partnership agreement with ICE.

The agency says it will train IMAGE participants on proper hiring procedures, fraudulent document detection, use of E-Verify and anti-discrimination procedures.

Many employers already use the E-Verify federal online database to check the employment eligibility of new hires - either voluntarily or because they are required to by state or federal law. But unauthorized workers can still slip through if they use false documents with someone else's name and matching Social Security number. IMAGE aims to give employers extra tools to ensure a legal workforce, Morton said.

The government has cracked down on employers as part of its immigration enforcement policy, but officials have emphasized employer audits more than the high-profile workplace raids done during the administration of President George W. Bush.

Morton cited a key reason for recent interest in the program: the rise in enforcement actions.

"We're serious about enforcing the law against employers who violate it," he said.

Because program members must undergo a full I-9 audit to join - meaning they have to let ICE examine a representative sample of the employment documents - it is less likely they'll be audited in the future because the

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possibility of more internal compliance problems is "pretty minimal," said Greg Siskind, an immigration lawyer from Memphis, Tenn.

Companies in industries that have historically had problems with unauthorized workers, such as agriculture and hospitality, may want to join IMAGE to make sure their employees are eligible to work in the U.S., he said.

"Maybe you're trying to get out in front of that and trying to avoid problems if you actually end up getting audited," Siskind said.

Being "IMAGE certified" also can help a company score contracts with other companies and government agencies that place high importance on immigration compliance, said Dawn Lurie, a lawyer who advises businesses on immigration issues.

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