

'Utter chaos': ICE arrests 114 workers in immigration raid at Ohio gardening company; It was one of the largest workplace immigration raids in recent years, and it left dozens of the workers' children stranded at day-care centers and with babysitters, local activists said.

Washington Post Blogs

June 6, 2018 Wednesday 9:36 AM EST

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washingtonpost.com

Length: 1315 words

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Body

A swarm of immigration agents arrested more than 100 workers at an Ohio gardening and landscaping company Tuesday morning, one of the largest of several recent workplace raids carried out as part of the Trump administration's crackdown on immigration enforcement.

About 200 federal officers blitzed two locations of Corso's Flower and Garden Center - one in Sandusky, on the shoreline of Lake Erie, and another in nearby Castalia, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement told the Associated Press.

Agents surrounded the perimeter of the Castalia location, blocking off nearby streets as helicopters flew overhead, AP and local television stations reported. They arrested 114 workers suspected of being in the country illegally and loaded many onto buses bound for ICE detention facilities. Dozens of the workers' children were left stranded at day-care centers and with babysitters, local activists wrote on social media.

Officials expect to charge the undocumented workers with identity theft and tax evasion. They reviewed 313 employee records and found that 123 were suspicious, agency officials told the AP. ICE is also investigating the role the employer played in hiring the undocumented immigrants but has not yet filed charges against the family business, said Khaalid Walls, an agency spokesman.

Agents left the Sandusky location carrying boxes full of "a lot of documentary evidence," Steve Francis, special agent in charge of Homeland Security investigations, told the Sandusky Register. "We are attempting to identify what criminal network brought over 100 illegal aliens to Ohio to work."

The massive raid came exactly two months after federal officials arrested 97 immigrants at a meat-processing plant in rural Tennessee, in what civil rights groups called the largest single workplace raid in a decade. It follows other workplace raids across the country, including a nationwide sweep of 98 7-Eleven stores, which led to 21 arrests. ICE officials described the January raid as the largest operation targeting an employer since Trump became president.

At the time, ICE's top official said the 7-Eleven arrests were meant to send a "strong message" to other businesses employing unauthorized workers.

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The agency's acting director, Thomas D. Homan, who will be retiring this month, said last year that he had ordered agents to increase the number of worksite inspections and operations by "four or five times" this year. The aggressive efforts, Homan said, are meant to deter people from entering the country illegally and "protect jobs for American workers."

Tuesday's arrests in Ohio played out in ways similar to previous raids, such as the surprise blitz in the Tennessee factory. These tactics hark back to the immigration raids of the George W. Bush administration, the National Immigration Law Center told The Washington Post's Maria Sacchetti in April.

Department of Homeland Security officials have been receiving tips into Corso's Flower and Garden Center for years but began probing the business in October, when authorities arrested a woman suspected of operating a document mill, authorities told WNWO. The woman, Martha Buendia-Chavarria, was indicted in federal court in December of last year on charges including possessing false identity documents with an intent to transfer them.

This arrest led officials to employees at Corso's. Through audits, officials identified more than 100 employees who had documentation issues, such as duplicate Social Security numbers and identification belonging to other people, Francis told WNWO.

In Tuesday's raid, videos captured by workers and reporters showed immigration agents putting employees in handcuffs and separating authorized U.S. residents from undocumented immigrants. No employees were seen fleeing.

"We're on a barn, so we can't escape," employee Salma Sabala told WNWO. Sabala, who works at Corso's with her mother and sister, said undercover officers showed up in an employee break room initially offering to give out Dunkin' Donuts. Then, they started rounding up workers.

"They're armed. They had the dogs. We hear the helicopters on top of us," Sabala told WNWO. "They took them on a big bus."

"All I could think about is my mom, because I didn't know where she was. And also my sister, because I didn't know where my sister was, either. And everyone was just crying. It makes me really sad knowing that they're going to take some people away," she told the TV station, weeping.

Rosa Ramos, whose stepfather was taken into custody, shared with WNWO a text exchange with her stepfather, who sent a picture of himself as he rode an ICE bus headed to Michigan.

"Are they going to take away your cellphone now?" Ramos asked her stepfather in Spanish. "No, but it will run out of battery," he responded.

"Okay, I love you," she said. "Me too," he replied.

The 114 people arrested Tuesday were taken to detention facilities in St. Clair County, Michigan; Seneca County, Ohio; and the Youngstown, Ohio, area, WKYC reported. Meanwhile, families of the arrested workers gathered at St. Paul Catholic Church in Norwalk, Ohio, seeking answers as to the whereabouts of their loved ones.

A Latino advocacy group called HOLA Ohio shared urgent messages across Twitter and Facebook about the raid. Veronica Isabel Dahlberg, founder and executive director of the group, tweeted: "Children still in daycare. Utter chaos. This has to stop!!!"

She wrote on Facebook on Tuesday afternoon that dozens of children were stuck at day-care centers and with babysitters "without their parents to pick them up."

"We don't know what will happen to them," Dahlberg wrote. "We are already aware of a 16-year-old US Citizen boy who is being detained until an adult relative with documentation comes to claim him. So far, no one has been able to."

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She said several of the detained workers were scheduled to be deported that same day. As the group begins identifying those who are in custody, they plan to begin placing funds into their jail accounts so that they can contact relatives and lawyers. Dahlberg asked Ohio residents to call elected officials and plead for a response to the **raid**.

Meanwhile, at Corso's, business was back up and running Tuesday afternoon. The company did not respond to requests for comment from reporters throughout the day. According to its website, the family-owned business includes a greenhouse, flower shop, garden center, landscape department and a wholesale perennial plant division where more than 2 million plants are grown to supply a seven-state area.

The morning of the **raid**, the Ohio Landscape Association wrote on Facebook about a labor shortage affecting the green industry in Ohio and beyond. "There is not a large enough workforce to fill our seasonal positions," the organization wrote. "We need congress to pass legislation to provide more Visas now. The additional 15,000 Visas being issued does not meet the need."

The group referred to the H-2B visa program used by employers to hire seasonal immigrant workers and capped at 66,000 workers per year. After business owners complained they were scrambling to find workers, the Department of Homeland Security said late last month that it would issue 15,000 additional guest worker visas for 2018.

In response to news of Tuesday's **raid**, the Ohio Landscape Association wrote, "This is not good, but maybe highlights the need for usable guest worker programs."

About 125 landscape contractors in northeast Ohio depend on the H-2B visa program, Sandy Munley, executive director of the association said. This year, two-thirds were not approved for visas.

"There is just not the people out there to hire," Munley said.

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