

MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT: 21 airport workers detained

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Body

Twenty-one people, most working in food service businesses in secure areas at **Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport**, were **detained** Tuesday by federal agents on suspicion of various immigration violations.

U.S. Attorney Thomas Heffelfinger said the sweep was "part of a national and local effort to ensure that people who are employed in secure areas of our **airports** are there properly."

About half of those **detained** are from Mexico, Heffelfinger said. The sweep was conducted at such businesses as McDonald's, TGI Friday's and Sky Chef, a food supplier for airlines. One was employed at a shoeshine shop.

Those **detained** "would have access to travelers who have passed through security," Heffelfinger said.

The sweep was aimed at businesses and not because of information about any particular person, Heffelfinger said.

"We didn't know who we would find or which country they had come from," he said.

Last month, federal officials said they had arrested or indicted more than 450 **workers** at 15 **airports** across the country on such charges as using phony Social Security numbers, lying about past criminal convictions or being in the country illegally.

The arrests have been criticized by some as a long overdue response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the World Trade towers in New York City.

Others have called the arrests a crackdown on poorly paid working people who have no connection to terrorism.

Steve Thal, a Twin Cities immigration attorney and past chairman of the Minnesota-Dakotas chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said the United States and Mexico are negotiating to make it easier for U.S. businesses to hire Mexican employees.

Obtaining visas and proper work permits is difficult for Mexicans seeking low-paying U.S. jobs, Thal said.

Many undocumented employees "have worked very hard in this country and have had taxes withheld and have made positive contributions to our economy," Thal said.

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