

## 20 suspects carried N.C. licenses

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*By Taft Wireback Staff Writer*  
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GREENSBORO — Most of the aircraft workers arrested Tuesday on immigration charges at Piedmont Triad International Airport were carrying North Carolina driver's licenses they shouldn't have been issued.

Twenty of 24 suspected, illegal immigrants had N.C. licenses, highlighting a continuing problem that state government has been unable to vanquish, said Thomas O'Connell of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"That's not uncommon. Practically everybody we arrest has a North Carolina driver's license on them," said O'Connell, resident agent in charge of ICE's Piedmont Triad office.

O'Connell's agency arrests illegal immigrants who have overstayed their visa or otherwise entered the country illegally. It puts special emphasis on those working in such security-sensitive areas as airports, nuclear power plants and public utilities.

In addition to driver's licenses, immigrants taken into custody Tuesday had a "plethora" of worrisome documents as varied as federal airplane-repair licenses, fraudulent Social Security documents, counterfeit green cards and a falsified passport, O'Connell said.

O'Connell's staff joined investigators from the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Social Security Administration and other federal agencies in a sting that netted 27 suspects working for labor contractors at TIMCO, an aviation maintenance company on PTI's southeastern border.

Three turned out not to be illegal immigrants, but foreigners who were legally in the country. They remain in custody with the other 24 for alleged fraudulent activities not related directly to their immigration status, O'Connell said.

There is no evidence that any of those arrested Tuesday were involved in terrorism, federal authorities say.

Many of those arrested will receive deportation hearings in Atlanta.

Some will face federal criminal charges if it turns out they used fake documents to commit fraud. The driver's licenses would not be a major factor in such federal charges.

But experts believe that properly controlling access to driver's licenses is critical for national security because a license opens doors to many privileges beyond motoring.

It could help terrorists masquerade as law-abiding residents, experts say, giving them access to such services as a bank account and to such sensitive areas as government buildings or passenger jets.

North Carolina has gained a reputation as an easy mark for illegal immigrants seeking a license.

The N.C. Division of Motor Vehicles has improved somewhat at keeping licenses from them, O'Connell said. But the state still attracts "van loads of illegal aliens coming from Connecticut, New Jersey, Georgia and South Carolina" for licenses, he said.

Several of those arrested Tuesday had been ordered deported before, but ignored those orders, he said.

They can be removed from the country now fairly rapidly, O'Connell said.

He praised TIMCO for its cooperative response to the crisis in its contract work force.

Meanwhile, federal agents are looking into the 10 aviation contractors who provide temporary workers to TIMCO, beefing up the company's 1,700-person work force of permanent workers.

None of those arrested Tuesday were TIMCO employees.

Companies providing labor include S.M.A.R.T. Aviation of Florida, PlaneTechs of Illinois and Strom Aviation of Minnesota.

Investigators searched the home and office of a S.M.A.R.T. employee as part of the inquiry Tuesday. A company spokeswoman declined comment.

PlaneTechs President Ian Rollo said his company provides TIMCO with about 30 temporary workers, complies with all federal hiring requirements and has received no notice or suggestion of wrongdoing.

Labor contractors could be charged with a violation of federal law if it turns out they "knowingly" trafficked in illegal immigrants, said John Long of U.S. DOT's office of inspector general.

The arrests were the latest phase in the federal government's continuing "Operation Tarmac," a nationwide effort begun after the 2001 terrorist attacks to target illegal immigrants working in such security-sensitive places as airports.

At least two of the 24 alleged, illegal immigrants had obtained professional licenses, issued by the Federal Aviation Administration, to work on some of the most technical parts of an airplane. The two, Jorge Chacon of Panama and Percy Vega of Peru, both live in Greensboro, according to the Landings.com Web site that records such aviation licenses.

The U.S. DOT's overriding interest in those arrested Tuesday is to learn which, if any, received professional licenses or certifications through the use of false documents, such as a fraudulent Social Security number, Long said.

"The folks that we are able to prove did this will be charged criminally and they will be prosecuted in federal court," Long said.

Contact Taft Wireback at 373-7100 or

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