

Homeland security action against illegals lacking

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The agency charged with interior immigration enforcement all but ignores going after illegal aliens in the workplace, the Government Accountability Office said in a report released yesterday.

The GAO found that an antiquated system for businesses to verify employees' right to work has hindered U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in its mission of tracking and deporting illegal aliens in the nation's interior. In addition, the widespread use of fraudulent documents has made it difficult for both employers and ICE to detect illegal workers.

GAO investigators also said ICE, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, is devoting more attention to preventing terrorism, but that has meant less attention to illegal immigration in general.

"Work site enforcement has been a relatively low priority," the GAO said, adding that some problems from the former Immigration and Naturalization Service carried over when that agency was abolished and split into ICE and other agencies in the Department of Homeland Security.

The report is likely to boost some House Republicans' efforts to pass an immigration security enforcement bill. Rep. David Dreier, California Republican, said it shows why his plan to create a counterfeit-resistant Social Security card is needed.

Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Wisconsin Republican and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said the situation with ICE was "unacceptable."

"Despite a substantial increase in enforcement officers and a huge public outcry about weak border security and increased levels of violent crime visited upon local communities by alien criminals, ICE can find no time for one of its most basic functions," he said.

Rep. John Hostettler, chairman of the immigration, border security and claims subcommittee, said the report should be a message to the Bush administration.

"No serious effort to stem the flow of illegal aliens into the United States can take place without placing the elimination of the 'jobs magnet' at the top of the priority list," the Indiana Republican said. "I hope that at some point this administration learns that fact."

GAO staff had presented some findings to Mr. Hostettler's subcommittee earlier this year, including that between 1999 and 2003 the number of notices of an intent to fine employers for immigration law violations dropped from 417 to three.

In a response included in the GAO report Steven J. Pecinovsky, the Department of Homeland Security's liaison to the GAO, said ICE would set a timetable for looking into whether it could change the employee work verification process, but did not commit to actually streamlining it. Mr. Pecinovsky also promised to have ICE set targets for workplace enforcement.



Highlights of [GAO-05-813](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The opportunity for employment is one of the most important magnets attracting illegal immigrants to the United States. Immigration experts state that strategies to deter illegal immigration require both a reliable employment eligibility verification process and a worksite enforcement capacity to ensure that employers comply with immigration-related employment laws. This report examines (1) the current employment verification (Form I-9) process and challenges, if any, facing verification; and (2) the priorities and resources of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) worksite enforcement program and any challenges in implementing the program.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Homeland Security set a target time frame for completing the department's review of the Form I-9 process and issuing final regulations on the process, assess the feasibility and costs of addressing the Basic Pilot Program's current weaknesses, and establish additional output goals and measures and set a target time frame for developing outcome goals and measures for the worksite enforcement program. In written comments on a draft of this report, DHS agreed with our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-813.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Richard M. Stana at (202) 512-8777 or stanar@gao.gov.

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

Weaknesses Hinder Employment Verification and Worksite Enforcement Efforts

What GAO Found

The current employment verification process is based on employers' review of documents presented by new employees to prove their identity and work eligibility. On the Form I-9, employers certify that they have reviewed employees' documents and that the documents appear genuine and relate to the individual presenting them. However, various studies have shown that document fraud (use of counterfeit documents) and identity fraud (fraudulent use of valid documents or information belonging to others) have made it difficult for employers who want to comply with the employment verification process to hire only authorized workers and easier for unscrupulous employers to knowingly hire unauthorized workers. The large number and variety of documents acceptable for proving work eligibility have also hindered verification efforts. In 1997, the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), now part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), issued an interim rule on a reduction in the number of acceptable work eligibility documents and, in 1998, proposed a further reduction, but this proposal has not yet been finalized. DHS is currently reviewing the list of acceptable work eligibility documents, but has not established a target time frame for completing this review. The Basic Pilot Program, a voluntary program through which participating employers electronically verify employees' work eligibility, has potential to help enhance the verification process and substantially reduce document fraud. Yet, current weaknesses in the program, such as the inability of the program to detect identity fraud, DHS delays in entering data into its databases, and some employer noncompliance with pilot program requirements could, if not addressed, have a significant impact on the program's success. Furthermore, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials stated that the current Basic Pilot Program may not be able to complete timely verifications if the number of employers using the program significantly increased.

Worksite enforcement is one of various immigration enforcement programs that compete for resources and, under the former INS and now under ICE, worksite enforcement has been a relatively low priority. Consistent with DHS's mission to combat terrorism, after September 11, 2001, INS and then ICE focused worksite enforcement resources mainly on removing unauthorized workers from critical infrastructure sites to help address those sites' vulnerabilities. Since fiscal year 1999, the numbers of employer notices of intent to fine and administrative worksite arrests have generally declined, according to ICE, due to various factors such as document fraud, which makes it difficult to prove employer violations. ICE has not yet developed outcome goals and measures for its worksite enforcement program, which, given limited resources and competing priorities for those resources, may hinder ICE's efforts to determine resources needed for the program.