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Feds to target Ariz. employers of undocumented workers

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The Arizona Republic
Oct. 4, 2006 12:00 AM

Federal authorities in Arizona are expected to crack down soon on businesses that knowingly hire undocumented workers, joining a nationwide effort to bust employers most responsible for the job magnet that attracts illegal immigrants to the United States.

Russell "Pete" Ahr, a spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Phoenix, said the agency's worksite enforcement unit has been beefed up to pursue felony charges against those who willfully use unauthorized labor.

"It is active now," Ahr said of the unit. "It is conducting investigations. There are going to be visible results in the foreseeable future. ... We're not fining (companies) anymore. We're going after criminal indictments against the owners."

During raids, some illegal immigrants are likely to be arrested for deportation. But, Ahr emphasized, ICE agents will not conduct random sweeps to round up undocumented workers. They will use tips and intelligence to identify business operators who purposely violate the law.

Ahr declined to say what industries or types of businesses may be targeted.

The crackdown comes at a time when illegal immigration is a hot political issue, with grass-roots lobbying, election campaigns and congressional feuding over reform.

In December, the Republican-controlled House passed an enforcement-only measure that calls for more border security and mandatory verification of employment documents. A bipartisan Senate bill would enhance enforcement, but it also provides for the legalization of undocumented immigrants who are vital to some U.S. industries.

Congress adjourned last week without taking final action on either measure.

The workplace enforcement effort evolved gradually, with ICE agents in some jurisdictions cracking down on employers as early as 2004. The Department of Homeland Security publicly touted the program in April, when ICE agents arrested seven managers from a pallet-manufacturing company. During raids at company sites in 26 states, including Arizona, 1,187 workers were discovered with false documents.

Since then, the prosecution of employers has accelerated. As of August of fiscal 2006, agents had arrested 668 business owners or managers in the employment of undocumented workers, 525 more than in the seven prior years combined.

Although the increase seems dramatic, the total number of prosecutions remains fractional in an economy with an estimated 4.9 million private employers and 7.2 million undocumented workers. By some estimates, undocumented workers make up 5 percent of the nation's workforce.

Against that backdrop, critics say a smattering of criminal cases suggests political tokenism.

