

Sweep nabs 12 suspected illegal workers  
ICE arrests at area restaurants linked to national cleaning firm

By Fernando Quintero, Rocky Mountain News

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A dozen suspected illegal immigrant workers at three metro-area chain restaurants were arrested early Thursday morning as part of an ongoing investigation of a nationwide janitorial service.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents raided the ESPN Zone on the 16th Street Mall and Dave and Buster's locations in Denver and Westminster. Ten of the workers were Mexican nationals and the other two were from Guatemala and El Salvador, according to Jeff Copp, special agent in charge of investigations in the Denver ICE office.

In all, more than 200 suspected illegal immigrants in 18 states were arrested, along with three top officials of Nevada-based Rosenbaum-Cunningham International Inc., a cleaning service contractor for restaurants and other businesses.

RCI workers were rounded up Thursday at 63 locations nationwide, including a number of theme restaurants such as the Hard Rock Cafe and Planet Hollywood, according to ICE officials.

RCI co-owners Edward Scott Cunningham and Richard M. Rosenbaum, and firm controller Christina Flocken, face immigration, criminal fraud and tax charges in the 23-count indictment unsealed in U.S. District Court in Grand Rapids, Mich.

"The RCI indictment spells out in detail how some employers try to beat the system and their competition by hiring illegal workers," said Copp. "Consequently, if convicted, the RCI owners face up to 10 years in prison and millions of dollars in restitution to the U.S. government."

Local immigrant rights activists denounced the raids and planned a vigil at the Centro Humanitario day labor center in Denver on Thursday night.

"Immigrants caught up in these raids are symptoms, not the cause of the problem. By targeting workers, we're doing nothing to fix our broken immigration system," said Danielle Short of the Colorado American Friends and Service Committee.

Colorado Restaurant Association President Pete Meersman said the RCI raids could have a chilling effect on dining establishments. He said kitchen staff jobs, especially dishwashing and cleaning positions, tend to be the hardest to fill and present the biggest challenges for employers trying to hire legal workers.

Recent raids

The arrests Thursday of 12 suspected illegal immigrants at metro Denver restaurants mark the fourth major raid involving Colorado workers in the past year.

- Swift & Co.: On Dec. 12, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents netted 261 undocumented workers in Greeley and at meat-processing plants in five other states.
- Buckley Air Force Base: On Sept. 20, ICE agents arrested at least 120 undocumented workers who were building houses adjacent to the base, as part of a crackdown on illegal immigrants who could pose a security risk to the nation's "critical infrastructure facilities."
- IFCO Systems: On April 19, ICE raided 40 sites owned by the nation's largest pallet recycler, including its operation in Commerce City, where 38 workers were arrested.

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