

Immigration issues make work harder to find, some say

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An increase in enforcement and uncertainty over immigration reform appear to be making it more difficult for Houston's illegal immigrants to find work, according to some workers and immigration attorneys.

"Work is scarce," said Pablito, a 47-year-old Mexican who was looking for work on Thursday at an East End day labor center. "Lately, the bosses are afraid to give us work."

Pablito, who refused to give his last name, said he's had trouble finding a job as politicians debate immigration reform and authorities crack down on employers who hire illegal immigrants like him.

Lawyers who consult with businesses on immigration matters also have noticed the difficulty among illegal immigrants in finding work.

"We do sense that employers are more and more concerned, especially in the last six to nine months," said Elaine Morley, immigration attorney and chief executive officer of Houston-based Lookout Services, which sells companies software to electronically verify an applicant's employment eligibility.

Employers are worried because the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency has stepped up its raids across the country, issuing hefty fines and imprisoning company executives, said Jacob Monty, an immigration attorney with Monty Partners, a Houston-based law firm.

"Even if the reform doesn't happen soon, we're seeing increased enforcement by ICE," he said.

Since September, his firm has been hired by more than 100 U.S. companies to conduct mock investigations at job sites to ensure employers have not hired illegal immigrants.

Monty employs five teams of retired immigration officers to review a company's stack of I-9s, the forms that verify a worker's identity and eligibility to work. The agents point out violations so employers can resolve the discrepancies.

"We give them a list of the potential fines that would have incurred if this had been a real audit," Monty said. "It really brings home the point."

Monty said he would like to see the immigration reform bill pending in the Senate pass so that his clients will get clarity on what they can and cannot do.

A Greater Houston Partnership study done within the last year found that about 250,000 unauthorized immigrants work in the Houston area, making up nearly 10 percent of the work force and contributing \$27.3 billion to the area's gross regional product.

The bill, in addition to increased funding for border security, would require illegal immigrants like Pablito to pay fines and return to his home in Zacatecas, Mexico, before he could qualify for a temporary work visa.

Pablito said he might consider applying for the visa.

But he said it's hard to earn enough money to pay the \$250 he owes for his June rent, so paying a \$1,000 fine to apply and then paying for other fees is "for the rich."

Illegal immigrant Enrique Santana, 49, said he dislikes the idea of having to return home first to get a visa because his wife and three children also are undocumented and live here.

"I think it's bad because we will leave the family unprotected," said Santana, as he took a break from English classes he takes after his construction job. It's a job he fears losing as rumors swirl among his immigrant co-workers that his company will take a second look at their identifications and Social Security cards.

"There's fear among everyone that Immigration could come," Santana said.

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