

Press Office

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JOINT TASK FORCES CREATED IN 10 CITIES TO COMBAT DOCUMENT AND BENEFIT FRAUD

*The 10 new entities build on the success of existing task force in Washington, D.C./
northern Virginia*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Officials from the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of Labor, Department of State and other agencies today announced the creation of task forces in 10 major U.S. cities to combat the growing problems of document fraud and immigration benefits fraud.

The new “Document and Benefit Fraud Task Forces” will be located in Atlanta, GA; Boston, MA; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Detroit, MI; Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY; Newark, NJ; Philadelphia, PA; and St. Paul, MN. The ten new task forces build upon the success of an existing document and benefit fraud task force in the Washington, D.C. / northern Virginia area.

Led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the task forces build on existing partnerships to bring investigators together from a variety of agencies with expertise in different aspects of document and benefit fraud. These agents will partner with U.S. Attorney's Offices to formulate a comprehensive approach in targeting criminal organizations behind these schemes as well as the ineligible beneficiaries of such fraud. Any case where a sufficient nexus to terrorism is discovered will be referred to the Joint Terrorism Task Forces.

Participants in the task forces include ICE, the Department of Justice, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Department of Labor Inspector Office of General, Social Security Administration Office of Inspector General, State Department Office of Inspector General, State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, U.S. Secret Service and numerous state and local law enforcement agencies. The task forces will primarily target two types of crimes:

Document fraud

This crime refers to the manufacture, sale, or use of counterfeit identity documents – such as fake driver's licenses, birth certificates, social security cards, or passports – for immigration fraud or other criminal activity. Document fraud also involves efforts to obtain genuine identity documents through fraudulent means. These activities have helped illegal aliens, criminals and even terrorists evade detection and embed themselves in our society. Document fraud often supports the crime of benefit fraud.

The threat posed by document fraud is exemplified by the fact that at least seven of the 9/11 hijackers obtained genuine Virginia identity documents by submitting fraudulent Virginia residency certificates. Using these ID cards, the hijackers were able to clear airport security and board aircraft for the attacks.

Benefit fraud

This crime refers to the misrepresentation or omission of material fact on an application to obtain an immigration benefit one is not entitled to – such as U.S. citizenship, political asylum, or a valid visa. Because these benefits give one the ability to freely enter, work, or reside in this country, they are prized by illegal aliens, criminals, and terrorists who may be willing to pay substantial fees for them. As a result, the criminal organizations that help individuals fraudulently obtain immigration benefits reap enormous profits.

Among those who have benefited from this type of fraud is Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing who engaged in asylum fraud to enter this country. Every year, tens of thousands of applications for immigration benefits are denied because of fraud. One recent audit estimated that as many as 33 percent of applications for one particular category of visa were fraudulent.

“One of lessons from 9/11 is that false identities and fraudulent documents present serious risks to national security,” said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. “President Bush has directed the creation of these task forces to play a vital role in the fight against terrorists, human traffickers, and immigration violators. We must deny criminals the identification tools they need to threaten our country, cross our borders illegally and violate our immigration laws without detection.”

ICE Assistant Secretary Myers stated, “These new task forces are badly needed to help combat the significant threats posed by document and benefit fraud schemes. By harnessing the expertise of numerous agencies in coordinated task forces across the country, we believe we can reverse the alarming growth and sophistication of these crimes.”

Deputy Attorney General McNulty said, “Document fraud is a serious problem and is the common element of many different crimes. The Task Forces announced today will help restore the integrity of our immigration system and will help close the loopholes that terrorists and other criminals exploit to enter and remain in the United States by fraud.”

USCIS Director Gonzalez said, “We can never lose sight of the fact that legal immigration to the United States is a highly-valued privilege. We must do everything in our collective powers to maintain the trust we’ve been given to safeguard that most precious of gifts.”

Trends in Document and Benefit Fraud

In recent years, the problems of document and benefit fraud have surged, mandating a task force approach. ICE established an Identity & Benefit Fraud Unit shortly after the agency was created in March 2003 to coordinate leads received from USCIS and funnel this information to ICE field offices for investigation. Over the past two years, the number of document and benefit fraud investigations launched by ICE has increased from 2,334 in Fiscal Year 2004 to 3,591 in FY 2005. Criminal indictments in these cases have increased from 767 to 875, while arrests have risen from 1,300 to 1,391 and convictions have increased from 559 to 992.

At the same time, the sophistication of these schemes has increased with new technology. In the past, the tools of the counterfeit document trade were typewriters and pieces of plastic. Today, document forgers are using computer software and high-resolution digital scanners to ply their trade. Criminal organizations are also using the Internet more frequently to market fake documents and immigration benefits to customers.

In addition, investigators are finding large-scale criminal organizations involved in these schemes. In one case in Denver, ICE agents discovered that members of the Mexico-based Castorena family counterfeit document organization controlled cells in at least 33 U.S. states. The cell “heads” paid as much as \$15,000 per month to leaders of the Castorena organization for the right to operate fake document “franchises” in each U.S. city. Counterfeit documents manufactured by this single criminal organization have been found in all 50 states.

Investigations have also revealed that violators in many benefit fraud schemes are often professional attorneys, immigration consultants, and executives drawn by the profits they can reap from a desperate clientele. Yesterday, ICE agents arrested the operator of a Bronx non-profit organization who allegedly made some \$1 million by filing 1,300 bogus benefit applications for illegal aliens for a fee. In January, ICE seized \$5.7 million from a New Jersey man who created shell companies to file some 1,000 bogus labor petitions on behalf of Pakistani and Indian aliens seeking to enter or remain in this country. In December, a Washington D.C. law firm pleaded guilty to submitting fraudulent labor certifications for more than 100 illegal aliens

ICE is in a unique position to contribute to these new task forces, given its combined immigration and customs authorities. Furthermore, ICE will bring the expertise of its Forensic Document Laboratory (FDL), which is recognized as one of the premiere fraudulent document analysis facilities in the world. Every year, the FDL provides forensic document support to thousands of cases from agencies in the United States and around the world. ICE will also provide the services of its Cyber Crimes Center to investigate any Internet-related aspects of document and benefit fraud uncovered by the task forces.

Washington, D.C. / Northern Virginia Model

The new Document and Benefit Task Forces are being modeled on the multi-agency task force launched by the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia in recent years. Under this effort, a host of different agencies were brought together in Virginia to lend their respective expertise to these investigations and prosecutions. As a result, some of the largest document and benefit fraud investigations in the nation have been prosecuted in this judicial district.

In the past year, ICE agents working under this task force umbrella with the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Department of Labor, Social Security Administration Office of Inspector General, Department of State, and the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police Department, have arrested more than 40 counterfeit document vendors. They have also executed more than 11 search warrants and closed down seven document mills during this period. Roughly 10,000 counterfeit documents have been seized with an estimated street value of \$1 million. These efforts have targeted major counterfeit document organizations operating in the area.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.

