

INCREASE IN IMMIGRATION ARRESTS LEAVES TOWN'S WORKFORCE DEPLETED

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Sunday, April 14, 2002 - YUMA - When the knock came, it was Olivia Vasquez's 5-year-old daughter who answered the door.

The U.S. immigration agent on the other side entered the little trailer house and gave Olivia Vasquez and her husband 10 minutes to pack a bag.

The agents loaded the couple in a van that took them to Brush, then Denver, where they say they were fingerprinted and strip-searched. The couple's four children stayed behind with a cousin.

Olivia Vasquez said authorities told her she was being arrested for giving a fake Social Security number to one of her employers. Her husband was taken when he couldn't provide proof of legal immigration status.

"Here, it's full of Mexicans. We're almost all illegals," said Vasquez, 35, who has lived in Yuma for more than six years, doing various cleaning jobs and raising four children, three of whom are U.S. citizens. The couple were recently released on bond after spending eight days in an Immigration and Naturalization Service detention center in Denver.

"Who is going to do the work if they arrest all of us?" she asked.

It's a question on many people's minds here.

Residents say that since March 6, the INS has arrested at least 30 people in Yuma County, according to local immigration advocates. The arrests are part of an operation the agency says is routine, but which residents say represents a dramatic increase in INS activity in the area.

Many of the arrests came after traffic stops by the Colorado State Patrol, which is cooperating more closely with the federal agency, according to a State Patrol spokesman in Yuma. But the federal agency separately has also raided homes and staked out stores where immigrants shop, say workers and immigrant advocate groups.

"I've been here almost 21 years, and I've never seen anything like this," said Yuma County Sheriff Sam McCoy.

Sgt. Dan Overturf, a state trooper in Yuma, said his agency began cooperating more closely with federal immigration authorities after a recent request from INS agents in Brush.

"We're not out looking for people to pull over," Overturf said. "We're giving INS a courtesy call" when drivers can't produce identification "and then it's their choice what they do after that."

The arrests have sent a shiver through a community whose farms, dairies and feedlots depend on undocumented Mexican workers.

For more than a week after the arrests began, absences in local schools and businesses rose dramatically, say school officials and local employers, as entire families hid in the basements of friends' homes or left town entirely.

"At 10 o'clock at night, when there is usually lots of cars out driving around, lots of cars at 7-Eleven, there was not a vehicle to be found," said Eric Bleak, the human resources manager at Central Plains Farms, where the workforce is 65 percent Hispanic.

Bleak said production at the company dropped as employees disappeared for days. "We just took a tremendous hit," he said.

The arrests have raised a dilemma for the community - one which cities and towns across the country are increasingly facing amidst a heightened enforcement of immigration laws after Sept. 11.

For much of the last decade, the INS has concentrated its enforcement efforts on protecting the country's borders. The 2,000 agents dedicated to enforcement within the country's borders had focused largely on immigrants who commit other crimes, like robbery.

But as the INS retools under growing national criticism, that may be changing, experts say. The agency has recently begun subpoenaing hiring records of businesses in Kansas and Missouri to track down undocumented workers in the fast-food industry there. And late last year, the Justice Department entered into a national FBI database the names of more than 300,000 foreigners who have managed to stay in the country after judges ordered them deported.

"For those of us who have been in law enforcement for a long time, I can say this stuff is happening a lot more often after 9/11," said Joe Maier, chief of the Yuma Police Department.

Immigration advocates say they are seeing signs of stepped-up enforcement in Denver as well, including a sudden increase in so-called "no match" letters sent to businesses with employees who have discrepancies in their Social Security numbers.

"I know we have laws," said Liz Felker, a counselor at Yuma Middle School. "But you don't see the reason for the laws; you just see the kids and their families," she said. "You see how much they mean to you and how much they contribute to the community."

In Yuma's case, the newcomers provide much of the manpower for two big hog farms and a feedlot that have buoyed the town's economy since the mid-1990s.

"Yuma has lots of Mexican workers. I always figured that if they worked hard, no one really cared," said Tom Holtorf, who manages a feedlot east of town that employs mostly Hispanics, including Enrique and Olivia Vasquez.

Holtorf's company put up the \$10,000 bond for the Vasquezes' release. As the number of arrests grows, other local employers have called groups that provide services to undocumented workers, offering donations of food or money.

But INS authorities in Denver also confirmed that some of the Yuma arrests have stemmed from information provided by local residents.

Nina Pruneda-Muniz, an INS spokesman for the agency's Denver district, said that if anything, the timing of the arrests is linked to the opening of an INS rapid response office in Brush two years ago. The arrests aren't related to post-Sept. 11 pressures, she said.

"The INS is just enforcing the law," Pruneda-Muniz said. "If you're undocumented, you're going to be arrested and you're going to be removed from the country."

For their part, Olivia Vasquez and her husband have hired a lawyer and plan to fight their deportation. The couple bought a trailer house in a tree-lined Yuma neighborhood two years ago, putting the title in a relative's name. And their children, two of whom were born in the United States, now feel at home here, Olivia Vasquez said.

"We've been treated like the worst kind of criminal," she said, but "the only thing we've done is work."