

ICE arrests 16 in Whatcom County during ‘criminal investigation’

By David Rasbach, September 5, 2018, Bellingham Herald

<https://www.bellinghamherald.com/news/local/crime/article217817970.html>

Agents from the U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement arrested 16 people in Whatcom County last week in an “ongoing criminal investigation,” according to an ICE spokesperson.

“On Aug. 29, ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) special agents, with assistance from ICE’s Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) and the U.S. Border Patrol, conducted an enforcement operation during which 16 people were arrested,” ICE public affairs officer Carissa Cutrell said Wednesday.

“This operation was pursuant to an ongoing criminal investigation. No arrests or enforcement actions were conducted at any place of business. Because the investigation is ongoing, no additional information is available at this time.”

Cutrell’s email confirms some of information that has circulated on social media the past week after word of the arrests began to spread.

A Tacoma immigration rights attorney said his agency has talked with 10 people who are being detained at the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma after they were arrested in Whatcom County.

Jorge L. Baron, executive director of Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP), said another three people who were reportedly arrested have been located at the Tacoma facility, but his agency has not had contact with them.

“We haven’t been able to confirm all the details, but it’s not uncommon for people to be picked up by (federal immigration officials), especially these days,” Baron said. “What’s unusual about this part of the incident, from the information we have received, is that all the individuals were working at a particular business in the Bellingham area and were picked up in the same day.”

According to its website, NWIRP “promotes justice by defending and advancing the rights of immigrants through direct legal services, systemic advocacy and community education.”

Baron said its common for ICE agents to obtain search warrants, go to places of business, check paperwork and make arrests. But in this case, according to the detainees NWIRP has spoken to, people were arrested either at their homes or on their way to work.

“It’s not uncommon to have people arrested at their homes, but to have all these people connected by the same workplace is a bit out of the norm,” Baron said.

Baron said NWIRP has not been asked to formally represent any of the detainees.

A number of social media posts claimed the Whatcom County Sheriff’s Office was involved in the arrests, but Sheriff Bill Elfo said his agency did not participate in the arrests.

“Sheriff’s Office policy prohibits deputies from involvement in federal enforcement activities that are based solely for the purpose of determining a person’s immigration status or assisting federal agents in operations whose sole purpose is to determine a person’s immigration status,” Elfo said in an email.

“An inquiry revealed that deputies did not in any manner participate in this federal operation. Furthermore, the Sheriff’s Office was not asked by ICE to participate in any such activities.”

Last week’s action is believed to be the largest series of arrests by ICE in Whatcom County since a Feb. 24, 2009, raid at the Yamato Engine Specialists in Bellingham, when agents arrested 28 workers who were accused of being in the country illegally.