

Federal agency seeks help to put crime on ICE

RECRUITING: An increase in funding is helping the group search for agents among post-9/11 grads.

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By SHARON McNARY / The Press-Enterprise

As a boy growing up in Redlands, Raul Fernandez imagined himself unraveling financial crimes. Today, working a job that was made possible by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he investigates human smuggling and drug rings.

Recently, he followed a truck carrying a half-ton of marijuana from the Mexican border to an Inland area drop-off point.

"It was a 'cold convoy,' in which the driver was not aware I was following him," Fernandez said. He can't tell the rest of the story, because the investigation is continuing.

"Oftentimes, these special investigations may lead to big criminal organizations that span borders," Fernandez said.

The first in his family to work in law enforcement, Fernandez was initially a customs inspector, then he rode the post- 9/11 security buildup to become a special agent of the new Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

President Bush signed a \$369 million appropriation last month that will end a year-long hiring freeze, so ICE is recruiting nationwide for new entry-level agents like Fernandez who have four-year college degrees, foreign-language ability or law enforcement backgrounds.

ICE special agents enforce U.S. immigration and customs laws. ICE, the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security, was formed in March 2003. Its agents look for terrorists, and they

investigate human trafficking, commercial alien smuggling, document fraud and drug trafficking.

ICE has the intelligence, investigative, detention and deportation functions of the former INS, plus the Federal Protective Service (Fernandez worked security for presidential candidates in 2004) and the Federal Air Marshals Service.

Part of Fernandez's work has been to keep certain high-tech products that could be used for weapons out of the hands of terrorists by teaching local manufacturers how to screen their customers and to report suspicious sales. Other assignments, like breaking up a drug ring or seizing cigarettes that have counterfeit tobacco tax stamps, can dry up terrorists' money sources, he said.

"Some of that money may get funneled to the Middle East and into the terrorists hands," Fernandez said.

Fernandez said that on a typical day he follows the money that flows through drug, smuggling and business fraud cases. Sometimes the work is dangerous and involves secretly watching people or locations and making arrests.

"We often get calls from the public involving drop houses of illegal aliens," Fernandez said. He estimated he speaks Spanish about one-third of his time on the job.

Fernandez, 37, has a degree in business from Cal State San Bernardino and is fluent in Spanish. Both the degree and second language ability are desirable, as is experience in law enforcement. He joined the U.S.

Customs Service at age 24, and transferred to ICE in 2002. He now makes nearly \$100,000.

Starting agents can make \$37,000 to \$42,000 per year, with a 25 percent raise when they finish six months of training and become law enforcement officers. Special agents who get regular promotions can be making nearly \$100,000 within five years, ICE spokeswoman Virginia Kice said. The age limit for entry-level agents is 37 years.

Today's college graduates were freshmen on Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and post- 9/11 grads have shown a greater interest in public-service careers, said John Bridgeland, former director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under Bush.

Bridgeland was a creator of the U.S.A. Freedom Corps, parent agency of the Peace Corps, which has seen new graduates enroll in steeply increasing numbers, he said.

In 2001, 7,334 people in their 20s and 30s applied to become Peace Corps volunteers and 6,028 served, and that number has risen annually to 11,432 applications in 2004 with 7,081 serving, according to agency statistics.

The 9/11 college generation is also more likely to seek jobs protecting Americans in such agencies as the Department of Homeland Security, Bridgeland said.

"There are substantial recruitment needs relating to that department so it wouldn't surprise me if in the aftermath of 9/11 that young people who have a proclivity to serve are moving into those fields," Bridgeland said.

ICE is competing for recruits in an environment where jobs are more plentiful for new college graduates. A National Association of Colleges and Employers survey released last month said employers expect to hire 13 percent more grads than last year.

At the annual National Association of Colleges and Employers conference last month, federal defense, intelligence and national-security agencies were much more prominent among exhibitors than in recent years, said UCR Career Center director Deborah McCoy.

"It was quite a show of force," McCoy said.

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