

**IMMIGRATION**

# Homeland Security investigative agency seeks rebrand, without ICE



By [Nick Miroff](#)

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The investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security is launching a new effort this week to distance itself from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, its parent agency, because officials say the contentious politics of immigration enforcement have undercut its efforts to combat transnational crime.

Homeland Security Investigations will remain a branch of ICE but will debut its own website next week – scrubbed of ICE insignia – and give employees new email addresses. The rebranding effort will prominently feature HSI’s own badge and emphasize its affiliation with the Department of Homeland Security, instead of ICE.

The makeover partly aims to appease senior HSI agents who have sought a breakaway because so many major U.S. cities have adopted policies limiting cooperation with ICE. It would take an act of Congress to make HSI a fully independent agency within DHS, however, so the relaunch amounts to a compromise.

HSI officials say the ICE stigma follows them whenever they attempt to work with police departments and public officials in jurisdictions with sanctuary policies shielding their immigrant populations from deportation. HSI investigators say they have been kicked off joint narcotics investigations, heckled at campus career fairs and shunned by crime victims worried they’ll be arrested and deported.

HSI’s new “independent branding” will allow its agents “to work without the undue toxicity that in some places comes with the ICE moniker,” Patrick J. Lechleitner, ICE’s acting director, said in an interview.

“They’ll still be part of ICE, just like the Marines are part of the Department of the Navy,” Lechleitner said.

Several of the country’s largest cities have enacted sanctuary policies that prohibit or limit their police departments and city officials from cooperating with ICE, including New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago. The list grew longer during the Trump administration, when ICE officers ramped up arrests and deportations.

Trump, who promised to deport millions of immigrants but fell short of that goal during his presidency, has pledged to restore that approach if he returns to the White House after the November election.

Democratic officials have adamantly opposed ICE operations that sweep up immigrants living in the United States illegally without regard to their criminal histories. Sanctuary policies that shun ICE have been a blow to HSI, which has 6,000 agents, 93 offices abroad and a broad mandate to investigate transnational crimes, including terrorism, drug smuggling, human trafficking and money laundering.

Since its creation by the Department of Homeland Security in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, HSI has struggled to distinguish itself from the better-known branch of ICE, Enforcement and Removal Operations, which has a narrower focus on immigration detention and deportations.

“We needed to give HSI space to operate and do the criminal investigations, as much as possible unaffected by the political turmoil that’s involved with civil immigration,” Lechleitner said.

“We try to the best ability within the entire agency to be apolitical,” he said. “We’re not a political organization. We’re a law enforcement, national security, public safety agency. However, it was affecting HSI’s ability to conduct operations and investigations.”

Lechleitner was among 19 senior HSI officials, or Special Agents in Charge, who wrote a protest letter in 2018 to then-DHS Sec. Kirstjen Nielsen urging a breakup of ICE. The agency was facing a political backlash over its expansion of immigration arrests, including calls from some Democrats to “Abolish ICE.” Lechleitner was in charge of HSI’s Washington field office at the time.

“The perception of HSI’s investigative independence is unnecessarily impacted by the political nature of ERO’s civil immigration enforcement,” the agents told Nielsen.

The special agents said making HSI independent would “allow employees to develop a strong agency pride.”

The letter was akin to a bureaucratic bombshell inside DHS. But senior Trump officials described the proposal to break up ICE as “a nonstarter” and were critical of the HSI agents who signed the letter.

In December 2021, senior HSI agents sent an internal report to DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas urging him to let them become a standalone agency divorced from ICE. The report cited 77 instances in which the agency’s affiliation with ICE has hurt relations with state and local law enforcement, colleges and universities, and community groups, making it difficult to recruit new agents and build trust with victims of crime.

The push for HSI independence has been simmering since then. Mayorkas, who said one of his goals is to improve ICE’s reputation, has issued new enforcement guidelines for ICE that prioritize immigrants who are recent arrivals or pose a security threat. He has directed officers to take a hands-off approach to immigrants who may be living and working in the United States illegally if they don’t commit crimes. Worksite raids to round up illegally employed workers have ceased.

While HSI generally does not participate in immigration arrests and deportations, its agents are deployed along the U.S.-Mexico border and work closely with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to investigate smuggling activity and human trafficking cases.

ICE officials acknowledge the HSI rebranding effort could be reversed by a different administration, since it is a policy directive, rather than a formal reorganization. It will have no effect on ICE's \$8.5 billion annual budget, they said.