

A Top US Immigration Official Threatened To Fire Employees For Leaking Information To The Media

"I feel like there were no leaks before USCIS started doing super-sketchy things," one official told BuzzFeed News in response to the memo.

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People show their identification to a US Customs and Border Protection officer before their appointments to apply for asylum in the United States in Laredo, Texas.

Fernando Llano / AP

US immigration officials, including asylum and refugee officers, were told Thursday that they would be fired for leaking information to the media, according to an email sent to staff and obtained by BuzzFeed News.

The new acting director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services, Mark Koumans, sent the email to employees, telling them that as they regularly handle sensitive information, they need to guard it closely.

"We have the responsibility to protect the information that the agency and the public have

entrusted to us and it is imperative that we not betray that trust through the unauthorized disclosure ('leaking') of any such information," he wrote. "...recent unauthorized disclosures of sensitive, for official use only, and internal use only information by USCIS personnel to media outlets have brought this issue to the forefront."

He added that staff would be reprimanded and potentially suspended for two weeks for a first offense, another two weeks for a second offense, and terminated or removed from their job for a third leak.

The USCIS has been on the forefront of the Trump administration's overhaul of the asylum system. In the past year alone, the administration has forced asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico for their cases to be heard, barred asylum for those who crossed through Mexico, and on Wednesday, began a program to deport those at the southern border seeking protection from Honduras and El Salvador to Guatemala. USCIS officials, including asylum officers and others, have been pushed to administer all three of the controversial programs.

BuzzFeed News first revealed the implementation of the program on Wednesday. Later in the day, Reuters, which also reported the program starting up, posted training materials for asylum officers on the plan to deport individuals to Guatemala.

The email sent by Koumans mentions that staff can disclose "wrongdoing" under the Whistleblower Protection Act. But a USCIS official who read the email said Koumans missed the mark.

"It's ironic that the acting director would send such a message. Perhaps USCIS personnel are only following the president's example, such as when he loudly discussed sensitive information with an ambassador over an unsecured phone," the official said, referring to Trump's conversation with Ambassador Gordon Sondland about a potential Ukrainian investigation into the Biden family. "As for recognizing the rights of employees to disclose wrongdoing under the Whistleblower Protection Act, given the treatment of the current whistleblower by the president, what USCIS employee would be willing to jeopardize their safety by disclosing wrongdoings of this administration via formal channels? Employees have no other option than to covertly disclose rather than jeopardize being 'outed' and destroyed by the president."

Another USCIS official said the leaks have been a direct result of the agency's implementation of controversial policies.

"I feel like there were no leaks before USCIS started doing super-sketchy things," the official said. "I have zero confidence in this administration and whistleblower protection."

In January, the agency sent out an email also warning staff not to leak information, but that email did not mention leaking to the media or include a specific breakdown of potential suspension or firing.

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