

Immigration Staffers Were Warned Not To Leak Information To The Public

One USCIS official said the directive was puzzling. “If they want to stop people from talking to the press, they got to stop being so scandalous.”

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United States Citizenship and Immigration Services staffers were warned Wednesday that the “unauthorized release” of internal information to the public could risk “harm” to government operations and “threaten” the safety of the American public and law enforcement, according to an email sent to the staff and reviewed by BuzzFeed News.

The directive was released in a staffwide email that was titled “unauthorized release of information.”

“As federal employees, we often encounter information internal to the government that cannot be shared publicly,” the directive stated. “This includes internal operational guidance and/or information designated as classified or ‘For Official Use Only.’ This also includes information that is still deliberative or pre-decisional in nature, subject to change and therefore not yet ready to be shared with the public.”

The directive continued by stating that staffers should follow “proper handling procedures for such information. The unauthorized release of internal, pre-decisional information to the public can risk harm to our operations, create confusion, threaten the safety of the American public and law enforcement, and may even provide an opening to individuals to exploit those seeking to access our immigration system and programs.”

Staffers were also told that only public affairs officers were authorized to speak to the media and to contact management should they be approached by media members.

It was unclear what prompted the message, but it comes at a time of heightened interest in immigration topics. USCIS, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, is responsible for processing applications for citizenship and visas, among other services for immigrants.

The immigration agency is primarily funded through fees received from immigrants’ applications, such as filing for a green card, work permit, or an application for a family member who wishes to come to the country.

The directive comes less than a week after NBC published a report on a draft of policy options the news outlet had received from Sen. Jeff Merkley's office. One option included separating adults from children. Another option was to increase prosecution of parents caught crossing the border.

"I'm honestly not surprised that following a high profile leak, leadership would want to send out a reminder that they are not happy about leaks," said Scott Shuchart, a former senior adviser to the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at the US Department of Homeland Security from 2010 to 2018.

Ur Jaddou, a former chief counsel for USCIS, said such a directive could cause some members of the staff to pause before becoming a potential whistleblower.

"What troubles me about this is that there are clear protections in the law for whistleblowers, pretty broad protections," she said. The directive does state that it does not conflict with employee rights to inform on potential abuses. "If you are aware of some sort of waste, fraud or abuse and you got this memo — I mean, it would scare me a little bit."

The directive appears to be the latest effort by officials within the Trump administration to stop leaks.

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