

## BUSINESS

# Feds' ID verification letters frighten eateries, hotels that hire immigrants

By Lisa Fickenscher

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The hospitality industry is rattled over a fresh wave of letters from the feds demanding the verification of employees' Social Security numbers, The Post has learned.

After a seven-year hiatus, the Social Security Administration has begun sending out so called "no-match" letters to employers across the country, alerting them that the W-2 forms they submitted on behalf of their employees do not match the agency's records.

The agency is giving employers 60 days to correct the information, which could be the result of a typo or name change — or an indication that an employee is not a legal resident.

The sudden reappearance of these notices at a time when immigration has become a hot button political issue has many restaurant and hotel operators fretting over what this might mean for the industry, which is a large employer of immigrants.

Employers who have received the letters tell The Post they fear mass defections of key employees — and raids by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, or ICE.

“The job market is so tight right now that it’s very hard to replace employees,” said one New York City restaurant owner who received the notice about a month ago and did not want to be identified because a significant number of his employees were flagged.

“When I advertise for a cook or dishwasher, I very rarely get native-born applicants,” he said. “The whole industry is talking about this more than any other issue right now.”

“The letters scare me,” another restaurant owner who also requested anonymity said. “I’m already understaffed and working 15-hour days.”

The Social Security Administration has said that its “no match” letters, which have been around for decades, merely help the agency properly credit employees’ earnings on their Social Security records.

But they have also been associated with immigration enforcement. For example, in 2007, Homeland Security, which oversees ICE, introduced a rule that put the onus on employers to fire workers who were unable or unwilling to correct Social Security discrepancies.

The National Restaurant Association, among other groups, sued over the rule change, arguing that it was overly burdensome on employers and would result in discrimination against workers who are perceived to be immigrants.

They won — and the letters stopped coming in 2012 under President Obama.

Last summer, the Social Security Administration said it would restart the practice in the spring of 2019, but has not explained why it opted to do so, industry sources complained.

“There is not a lot of information coming out from the government about this, and some employers are petrified that ICE audits and raids will increase,” hospitality attorney Carolyn Richmond of Fox Rothschild told The Post.

“We find the timing now very interesting given all the talk about immigration and the history of what happened,” Angelo Amador, regulatory counsel of the restaurant trade group that sued the feds in 2007, told The Post.

“The hospitality industry is on the front lines of this,” he said.

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