

POLITICS

Who Wants to Work for ICE? They Do.

At a busy hiring expo in Texas, new recruits answer Trump's call.

By Nick Miroff



Ron Jenkins / Getty

AUGUST 28, 2025

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IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT held a hiring expo this week outside Dallas at a place called the Esports Stadium. Set between the Texas Rangers ballpark and the roller coasters of Six Flags, the arena was built for video-game competitions, and a wall of bright-blue screens welcomed job candidates at the entrance. “With honor and integrity, we will safeguard the American people, our homeland and our values,” one message read. “Start your journey towards a meaningful career in law enforcement.”

Inside the cavernous main hall, organizers had parked a shiny Mustang with stenciled lettering that read DEFEND THE HOMELAND. A blinding 90-foot-wide LED display at the center of the stage was lit up with the ICE logo and recruitment slogans. The setup resembled a poker tournament or an ESPN draft night, lending a whiff of excitement and opportunity.

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ICE’s pitch for meaning and purpose seemed to draw in many of the applicants I met. Some were military veterans with combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan who told me they longed for the camaraderie and sense of belonging they once had. Others said they were bored, or wanted to serve the country, or fill a hole in their life left by a failed marriage or the creeping regrets they felt in middle age after screwing up in their 20s.

Chris Freese, 34, who works in elevator repair, told me he wished he had

joined the military after high school like his brother, who became an explosives expert in the Army. “I’ll do anything to help secure the country,” said Freese, who wore a T-shirt and cap emblazoned with the American flag, but had forgotten to bring his résumé. “If I don’t make it this time, I’ll keep trying,” he told me.

Nick Miroff: Fast times at Immigration and Customs Enforcement

The Trump administration plans to hire, train, and deploy 10,000 new ICE officers by the beginning of next year, a frantic pace that would nearly triple the current workforce. The Department of Homeland Security is set to spend more than \$40 million in the next several months on ICE recruitment, even as the department says it’s already received 130,000 applications. ICE had advertised same-day offers to qualified candidates, especially those with prior military service or law-enforcement experience, and a \$50,000 bonus to sweeten the pot. In the parking lot were license plates from New Mexico, Tennessee, and as far away as New Jersey. Hundreds of applicants began lining up before the doors opened at 8 a.m., many in suits, with résumés and diplomas in hand.

A small group of protesters began to gather across the roadway, yelling “Shame!” and “Hey hey, ho ho, ICE has got to go!,” but attendees in line mostly turned away.

Wandering the expo felt like walking through the set of a game show, a kind of speed dating for deportation jobs: After an on-the-spot interview, some got offers immediately and were sent to provide urine samples for drug testing, while others had to sit and wait for their name to be called.

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ICE planned to issue 900 tentative-offer letters to new recruits by the end of the two-day expo. They would need a medical screening, a fitness test, and a background check. But those selected could start at the ICE academy within four to six weeks, ICE officials told me.

The majority of applicants were male, but it was an otherwise diverse crowd, both in age and ethnicity, and certainly not the kind of all-white Trump army that some of the president's fiercest critics have caricatured. I traveled to Texas because I wanted to hear what the new recruits thought they were signing up for, and what ICE was telling them the job would be like.

"ICE career expos are an opportunity for patriotic Americans who want to help remove the worst of the worst from our country," the DHS spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin told me in an emailed statement.

The job-fair attendees I spoke with said the defend-the-homeland message and Donald Trump's presidency were big draws. "I want to stand up for my beliefs and protect America from foreign invaders," Brennan Sheets, 30, told me. "I'd like to be there for others who can't defend themselves. God is pushing me down this path."

Sheets, an Army veteran who has been working for a carpet-cleaning company, said he and his wife are expecting their first child, a daughter. The February 2024 murder of Laken Riley in Georgia by a Venezuelan man who was illegally in the country—which became a rallying cry among Trump supporters—“hurt my heart,” he told me. He was offered a job that afternoon.

Sheets was one of 15 applicants I spoke with at the expo. Some provided only a first name, saying they hadn’t told their current employer, or even some of their close family members, including parents or siblings who dislike Trump and ICE.

I asked Sheets what he thought it would be like to arrest families and face children crying while ICE hauls off their parents. He paused. “I’m good at compartmentalizing my emotions. I believe that I can make difficult decisions that I need to make,” he said. “Life isn’t all about love and rainbows.”

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TRUMP'S FUNDING BILL set a goal of 1 million deportations a year. Despite a fourfold increase in immigration arrests in U.S. cities and communities, ICE is not on pace to meet that goal, with the latest data showing the agency on track for about 300,000 deportations during the 2025 fiscal year, which ends in September. The hiring surge will put Trump in position next year to deploy teams in far more Democratic-led "sanctuary" cities that limit police cooperation with ICE.

Listen: How ICE became Trump's secret army

ICE has about 5,700 deportation officers nationwide. New entry-level jobs will pay roughly \$70,000 to \$90,000 a year, including overtime and cost-of-living adjustments, officials told me. Within Department of Homeland Security agencies, mass-hiring binges are viewed warily, and the rapid expansion of the U.S. Border Patrol a generation ago is still regarded as a cautionary tale. The Border Patrol lowered its hiring standards and ended up with more cases of employee misconduct and corruption.

Trump officials insist that won't happen. They have slashed ICE's 18-to-20-week training course to eight weeks (six days a week), waiving Spanish-language requirements, vehicle-pursuit courses, and other instruction. McLaughlin said new recruits will get the training they need on the job. Senior officials in each office will "mentor, coach and train agents and officers every step of the way," she promised.

"ICE is building a rigorous on-the-job training program that will be mandatory and tracked online and monitored closely," she told me. "We want new hires to take what they learn ... and apply it in real-life scenarios while on duty."

ICE's recruitment pitch, which invites applicants to reverse "cultural decline," has led some Trump critics to fear that the White House is rushing recruits into the streets to build an ideologically driven workforce more loyal to Trump's command than to the U.S. Constitution.

Financial incentives, though, were a powerful pull for many of the applicants I met. Calvin Bayona, a barrel-chested 29-year-old who drove to the expo from his home in rural Louisiana, explained that he had been recently laid off from his job as a military police officer in the Army, after nine years. He and his wife had just purchased a home, and Bayona said he didn't want to uproot his daughters. "I built this life up to where we are now," he told me. "I don't intend to lose it."

Bayona grew up in Guam and joined the Army after high school, and said his job was eliminated as part of a new reorganization-and-job-reduction plan directed by the Pentagon. He could apply to be a police officer in Louisiana, but an ICE position would pay much more. (Bayona got an offer the next day.)

An ICE-recruitment video played on a loop in the main event hall where applicants waited to be called, repeating over and over until it had the feeling of an indoctrination tool. It jumped from The Federalist Papers and Hamiltonian tariffs to the history of customs duties, immigration law, and the creation of ICE after the September 11 attacks. The video's pitch seemed geared toward a pre-Trump era, when ICE's main recruitment target was officers at other federal law-enforcement agencies who might be looking for something more technical and specialized. It touted ICE's role investigating intellectual-property crimes and returning stolen cultural artifacts, and the hunt for human-rights abusers, cybercriminals, sex predators, and money

launderers.

Under Trump, these tasks—which mostly fall to Homeland Security Investigations, ICE’s investigative branch—have taken a back seat to ICE deportations. There were no scenes in the video of ICE officers grabbing people inside courthouses or in Home Depot parking lots, or having to pull apart panicking families.

BY MIDDAY THE CROWD of protesters outside had grown to a few dozen, and the sound of their chanting was audible in the waiting area for urine samples. I LIKE MY TEXAS NEAT, read one protest sign, a clever cocktail reference, along with others that read ICE IS LEGALIZED KIDNAPPING.

“Turn around!” a woman yelled through a bullhorn at applicants lining up to pass through metal detectors. “Turn around!”

David Recio, 48, was one of several attendees who were a little jarred by the anger. A former Marine, Recio had spent his career working as a welding inspector for the oil industry in South Texas. “I want to clean up the country from bad guys, the criminals, the cartels, the rapists,” he told me, somewhat defensively. “I’d do my job without cruelty, without hate toward any race or any ethnicity. I’d do my job with compassion. I wouldn’t throw women or children to the ground.”

ICE officials said 2,500 applicants registered for the expo, and applicants streamed into the main hall throughout the day. Katherine, 33, had dropped out of the Marine Corps more than a decade ago due to a health emergency and recovered. Her daughter was a teenager now, and needed her less. Her job at a chiropractic clinic was dull. She shrugged at the protesters outside. “Some

people don't understand, but I fully support what President Trump is doing with ICE," Katherine told me. "With what's going on in the world, it's necessary," she said. "The U.S. needs to close the border and to be as safe as can be."

Katherine hadn't told her mother, who is from Lebanon, that she might join ICE, and wasn't sure if she'd approve. Her mother was recently yelled at by a man furious at hearing her speak Arabic in public. Katherine said that it was not the first time her mother had been mistreated for being a foreigner. "I see both sides," Katherine said. "I think I'll be able to explain it to her."

Patrick, 64, had worked in IT, led international church trips for teens, and sold fried organic chicken out of a food truck. He used to think Trump was a buffoon, but now he's a convert. He's in top shape from running triathlons, and rode a motorcycle to the expo in his suit. He told me he'd have no problem putting in the time needed to get the signing bonus (\$10,000 a year for five years of service). A protester outside had screamed at him: "How much are they paying you to be a racist?"

"Our country has gone downhill too much over the past 25 years," he told me.

Paul, 30, who was born and raised in Ukraine, serves in the National Guard. He said he would tell people back home in Chicago that he works "in homeland security." Chicago is "one of the bluest cities," he said, but he wants to stay in the city, to fight crime and "keep giving back" to his adopted country.

Nick Miroff: Trump loves ICE. Its workforce has never been so miserable.

There were other naturalized citizens among the applicants. Farzana Pramanik, 38, who was born in Bangladesh and wore a head covering, told me she had no law-enforcement background, but speaks Bengali, and some Hindi, and said she thought she could help people in ICE custody who know only those languages. “I want to do something for this country and do something meaningful,” Pramanik told me. Even if it meant deporting people she thought she could help? “If I can help, at the end of the day, I can say I did something,” she said.

The event center’s doors remained open until 4 p.m., and as the day wore on, the applicants who showed up were a more motley group. There were fewer suits, more scraggly beards, and more applicants who looked older than 50.

Jake Robbins, a 24-year-old bartender, walked out in disappointment after waiting hours in hopes he’d be called. He hadn’t served in the military or gone to college, but said he had a cousin who died of a fentanyl overdose, and he wanted to do something. “I don’t care about going after, you know, working people,” Robbins told me. “I want to bust the drug runners.” He said he would come back the next day if ICE sent him an email.

In the afternoon, a veteran ICE official, Matt Elliston, took the stage to answer questions. There were queries about location preferences (allowed), naturalized citizens with foreign-language skills (ICE wants them), and the training-academy logistics (put your possessions in storage to save on rent, Elliston recommended).

One applicant asked what will happen if Trump is no longer in office. ICE received \$75 billion from the president’s One Big Beautiful Bill Act, nearly 10 times its annual budget, and the money will pay for the staffing surge and an expansion of immigration-detention capacity over the next several years. “I’m

kind of worried about the future,” the applicant told Elliston. “Do we have a risk of losing our jobs if someone else gets into office?”

Elliston said ICE officials were planning for this contingency. “It’s my responsibility to make sure people who work for me are protected by me,” he told the crowd. “We’re looking at ways to make sure if something does happen, we can protect you the best we can.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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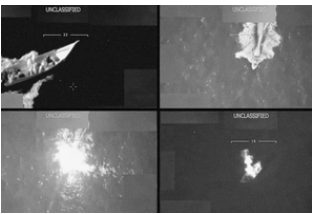


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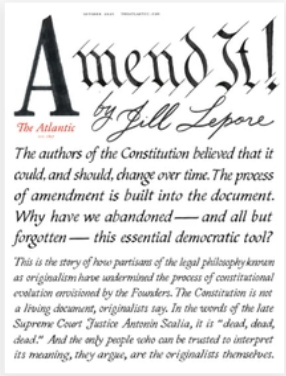
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