

NY EXCLUSIVE

ICE plans \$100 million ‘wartime recruitment’ push targeting gun shows, military fans for hires

A strategy document shared among immigration officials details plans to use influencers and geo-targeted ads to supercharge their push to hire thousands of deportation officers nationwide.

Today at 5:00 a.m. EST

By [Drew Harwell](#) and [Joyce Sohyun Lee](#)

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials are planning to spend \$100 million over a one-year period to recruit gun rights supporters and military enthusiasts through online influencers and a geo-targeted advertising campaign, part of what the agency called a “wartime recruitment” strategy it said was critical to hiring thousands of new deportation officers nationwide, according to an internal document reviewed by The Washington Post.

The spending would help President Donald Trump’s mass-deportation agenda dominate media networks and recruitment channels, including through ads targeting people who have attended UFC fights, listened to patriotic podcasts or shown an interest in guns and tactical gear, according to a 30-page document distributed among officials this summer detailing ICE’s “surge hiring marketing strategy.”

The Department of Homeland Security has spoken publicly about its fast-tracked effort to significantly increase ICE’s workforce by hiring more than 10,000 new employees, a surge promoted on social media with calls for recruits willing to perform their “sacred duty” and “defend the homeland” by repelling “foreign invaders.” The agency currently employs more than 20,000 people, according to ICE’s website.

But the document, reported here for the first time, reveals new details about the vast scale of the recruitment effort and its unconventional strategy to “flood the market” with millions of dollars in spending for Snapchat ads, influencers and live streamers on Rumble, a video platform popular with conservatives. Under the strategy, ICE would also use an ad-industry technique known as “geofencing” to send ads to the phone web browsers and social media feeds of anyone who set foot near military bases, NASCAR races, college campuses, or gun and trade shows.

The document was also distributed among ICE officials in the days after the agency published a request for bids seeking contractors who could use “precise audience targeting, performance media management, and results-driven creative strategies” to “accelerate the achievement of [its] recruiting goals.” The language in the published bid closely mirrored language in the strategy document. That same month, DHS awarded two marketing firms nearly \$40 million to support the ICE public affairs office “recruitment campaign,” according to federal awards data.

It’s unclear how much of the spending and strategy have been carried out. But the plans outlined in the document have coincided with a rush of recruitment ads online seeking Americans who will “answer the call to serve.”

The rapid-recruitment approach is unlike anything ICE has ever pursued, said Sarah Saldaña, a director of ICE during the Obama administration, who recalled the agency filling its open positions through local police departments and sheriff’s offices with appeals to officers’ interests in federal public-safety work.

She said she worries that the speed with which ICE is racing to bring on new hires — coupled with the ad campaign’s framing of the jobs as part of a war — will raise the risk that the agency could attract untrained recruits eager for all-out combat.

The appeal to law enforcement should not be “the quicker we get out there and run over people, the better off this country will be,” she said. “That mentality you’re fostering tends to inculcate in people a certain aggressiveness that may not be necessary in 85 percent of what you do.”

ICE deferred comment to Tricia McLaughlin, a DHS spokeswoman, who did not dispute a detailed list of claims and financial figures sent by The Post and said she was “thrilled to see the Washington Post highlight ... [the] wildly successful ICE recruitment campaign, which is under budget and ahead of schedule.”

The agency, she said, has received more than 220,000 job applications in five months and has issued more than 18,000 tentative job offers. More than 85 percent of the new hires had experience in law enforcement, she added.

Congress this summer tripled ICE’s enforcement and deportation budget to about \$30 billion by passing the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, helping to start a hiring spree that officials have said would be necessary to carry out the Trump administration’s promise of the biggest mass deportation in American history. Officials set a goal of 1 million deportations within the first year of Trump’s term.

To bolster its recruiting, the agency has removed its age limits for applicants and offered signing bonuses of up to \$50,000. A job listing on a federal hiring board said the salaries for many deportation officers could range from \$50,000 to \$90,000 a year.

Recruitment ads have proliferated across TV, radio, print and podcasts directing viewers to an ICE hiring website that portrays immigration as an existential threat. “America has been invaded by criminals and predators,” reads the website, which includes an image of Uncle Sam. “We need YOU to get them out.”

On social media, administration accounts have mixed immigration raid footage with memes from action movies and video games to portray ICE’s mission as a fight against the “enemies ... at the gates.” “Want to deport illegals with your absolute boys?” one post says. “Are you going to cowboy up or just lay there and bleed?” says another.

But to reach ICE’s “rapid hiring” goal of about 14,000 new Enforcement and Removal Operations officers, Homeland Security Investigations agents, ICE lawyers and support staff, the strategy document also calls for deploying more finely targeted digital advertising tools that can home in on viewers’ interests and lifestyles.

ICE recruitment ads, the plan said, would be shown to people with an interest in “military and veterans’ affairs,” “physical training” or “conservative news and politics” and would target people whose lifestyles are “patriotic” or “conservative-leaning.”

The strategy said to target listeners of conservative radio shows, country music and podcasts related to patriotism, men’s interests and true crime, as well as any accounts that resemble users with an interest in “conservative thought leaders, gun rights organizations [and] tactical gear brands,” the document said.

To further attract recruits, the strategy called for spending at least \$8 million on deals with online influencers whose followers are largely Gen Z and millennials and who were in the “military families,” “fitness” and “tactical/lifestyle enthusiast communities.”

The document did not name specific influencers but said it would focus on “former agents, veterans and pro-ICE creators” who would be expected to host live streams, attend events, and post short- and long-form videos and other content to Facebook, Instagram, Rumble, X and YouTube. Blogs, Substack newsletters and Threads accounts would also be targeted for more “niche communities,” the document said.

The objective, it said, is to build trust through “authentic peer-to-peer messaging” and to “normalize and humanize careers at ICE through storytelling and lived experiences.” The document said it expected more than 5,000 applicants would come through the influencer program, costing ICE about \$1,500 per application.

ICE has run ads on Google, LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook, targeting the latter to military veterans and “entry-level job” seekers, according to the companies’ ad libraries, which share public data on the platforms’ ad campaigns. Millions more in advertising was slated for delivery to gaming consoles, connected TV devices, and streaming services such as ESPN, Fox News and Paramount+, as well as across newspapers, billboards and box trucks, the strategy document said.

Listeners on Spotify have heard ICE ads calling on recruits to “fulfill your mission,” leading to hundreds of complaints on the music service’s message board. One NASCAR viewer who saw the ads on live streams said in a Reddit post that they changed the channel, and separately told The Post that they had “never felt such distaste for our government airing such ads.”

Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, a deputy director at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan Washington think tank, said ICE’s ads harked back to World War I recruitment posters by using symbols like Uncle Sam.

The war rhetoric is in line with the Trump administration’s broader efforts to push mass deportations as critical to American security and immigration officials’ work as heroic, she said. But the ads also allow ICE to gloss over the “messy realities of immigration enforcement,” including “the public backlash, the legal pushback and the very real operational constraints.”

“We’ve never seen immigration agencies kind of strip down the policy debates to this level of raw imagery and symbolism,” she added.

The strategy document features on the cover ICE’s second-in-command, Madison Sheahan, who worked as an aide to Homeland Security Secretary Kristi L. Noem when she was governor of South Dakota. In the photo, Sheahan, 28, wears a “police” vest and an ICE badge under the words “Defend the Homeland.”

The document called for spending “\$100 million within one year” as part of an “aggressive” recruitment program that would “saturate digital and traditional media” and prioritize “speed, scale and conversion at every level.”

Public ad-tracking figures from Google and Meta show ICE’s digital ad spending so far is a fraction of the strategy’s proposed budget for their platforms. McLaughlin, the DHS spokeswoman, did not respond to questions about how much money had been spent already or whether the strategy had changed.

Beyond demographic targeting, the strategy document also identified New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Chicago and Boston as “key locations” for finding recruits. The cities have been the targets of intense ICE sweeps and major anti-deportation protests over the last year.

The largest local recruitment target, seeking up to 1,000 removal officers, is slated for the New Orleans field office. The state of Louisiana has one of the country’s biggest immigrant detention populations, second only to Texas, and the New Orleans field office manages all nine detention facilities in the state.

ICE has hosted hiring events around the country, including at a Texas job fair earlier this year, during which a former mixed martial arts fighter told The Post he was eager to “work with these guys that are going to arrest you, slam your face on the pavement and send you home.”

But the strategy has also called for boosting recruitment at major gatherings and sporting events, including a booth at the NASCAR Cook Out Southern 500 in South Carolina in August; a “gym-based recruitment” event with “influencer-style content” at the UFC Fight Night in Las Vegas in November; and a planned sponsorship devoted to “patriotism, strength [and] grit” at the National Finals Rodeo this month in Las Vegas.

DHS did not say whether all the events proposed in the strategy were carried out, but its ads did accompany several of the events on TV. “ICE commercial during the UFC event tonight?! How gross,” one X user said in October. ICE also posted a bid in November seeking a firm to “identify suitable event locations” for “recruitment and outreach events.”

The recruitment ads run separately from other large-scale DHS campaigns that celebrate Trump’s immigration agenda and urge undocumented immigrants to leave the U.S. DHS has awarded more than \$200 million in contracts this year to People Who Think and Safe America Media, two marketing firms linked to Republican political consultants, federal contracting records show. Representatives from the firms did not respond to requests for comment.

Those efforts, too, have relied on ad-targeting techniques more commonly used by corporate marketing campaigns. The ad library for Meta, which runs Facebook and Instagram, shows that DHS has spent more than \$1 million on “self-deportation” ads in the last 90 days targeted to people interested in “Latin music,” “Spanish as a second language” and “Mexican cuisine.”

On a message board for the music streaming service Pandora, some users were furious about the ads they called “fearmongering ... propaganda.” One user, who said she is a U.S. citizen who likes listening to reggaeton, said she had been overwhelmed by DHS commercials “implying I am an undocumented immigrant and instructing me to ‘go home’” that played in “nearly every other ad slot I hear.”

ICE's ads have drawn criticism from some Democrats, who have called them overly inflammatory. Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee, led by Sen. Dick Durbin (Illinois), said in October that ICE's "polarizing recruitment ads" would "only attract MAGA radicals."

And some of the platforms on which the ads have run have expressed their own reservations. Earlier this month, a transit operator in Long Beach, California, removed ICE recruitment ads from its buses and apologized for the "uncertainty and fear" they may have caused, as was first reported by the Long Beach Watchdog, a local news source.

Americus Reed, a marketing professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, said the ICE strategy reminded him of the "Army of One" campaign that the military once used to build up recruits as mighty warfighters critical to safeguarding the American way of life.

"They're aiming for that sweet spot of people who've got something to prove, who want to have that power, under the guise of patriotism," he said.