

Thousands of DHS agents shift to deportation instead of drugs, weapons and human trafficking

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WASHINGTON – The Department of Homeland Security has ordered its entire investigations division - composed of 6,000 agents - to divert focus on drug dealers, terrorists, and human traffickers and shift priority to the Trump administration’s mission of deporting people in the U.S. illegally, USA TODAY has learned.

The new focus for DHS’s Homeland Security Investigations agency (HSI), current and former officials say, is in keeping with recent executive orders signed by President Donald Trump that demand a wholesale shift in federal law enforcement resources toward immigration crackdowns and removal.

But they warn the shift will undermine high-profile investigations into some of the most dangerous transnational threats Americans face, including Mexican drug cartels smuggling deadly fentanyl across the border from Mexico.

“A lot of my colleagues were afraid this was going to happen,” after Trump won election on a hardline immigration platform, said Chris Cappannelli, a former HSI supervisory agent. “This is going to be a total train wreck.”

“Some of my friends short of mandatory retirement yet eligible are rushing to get their retirement paperwork in,” Cappannelli told USA TODAY. “Others are looking for other law enforcement jobs outside of DHS where they won’t have to be chasing migrants. This isn’t what they signed up for – or the best use of their skills and experience.”

Asked about the shift, DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Tricia McLaughlin would only say that all DHS agents, including those at HSI, are now fulfilling the department's "primary mission of protecting America through the arrest and removal of illegal aliens who pose a threat to national security, public safety and the integrity of our nation's immigration laws."

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem has moved quickly since being sworn in Jan. 25 to deploy federal and state agents from across the government in the hunt for people in the country illegally. Last week, she asked Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to detail IRS agents who normally investigate tax fraud and money laundering to help "secure the southern border and enforce immigration laws."

Kenneth MacDonald, another former HSI supervisory agent and a former White House official, said other critical threats could go uninvestigated by HSI, which he described as the second largest U.S. federal investigative law enforcement agency after the FBI. Those include child exploitation crimes, cyberattacks and Dark Web financial schemes, Iranian and Chinese nuclear traffickers, Russian organized crime, trade fraud and sanctions investigations.

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"Anything that crosses the border, both electronically and digitally or physically, those things are within the purview of HSI. It's something like 400 statutes that we're responsible for enforcing," MacDonald said.

The directive could also threaten ongoing investigations and prosecutions, many of which are multi-agency efforts that have been years in the making – like several ongoing cases against the Sinaloa Cartel and other Mexican and Chinese transnational crime syndicates, current and former officials said.

"I know there's a lot of concern," MacDonald added. "No one has a problem if this is short term. But if this is the foreseeable future, internally there are going to be lots of problems" and even more protests.

HSI agents playing central roles in top national security investigations

Earlier this month, HSI agents played a key role in helping Dominican Republic authorities seize an aircraft used by the sanctioned Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural-gas company based on violations of U.S. export control and sanctions laws.

In another case two weeks ago, HSI agents helped investigate and arrest two men on charges of participating in a neo-Nazi child exploitation enterprise that groomed and then coerced minors around the world into producing produce child sexual abuse material.

And they have been instrumental in investigating and extraditing from Mexico alleged Sinaloa Cartel cell leader Octavio Leal-Hernandez, who the Justice Department said is responsible for trafficking large amounts of methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin and marijuana into the United States from Mexico.

“The arrest and extradition of Leal-Hernandez marks a significant victory in our relentless fight against the deadly scourge of narcotics trafficking,” Shawn Gibson, special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations in San Diego said Jan. 23. Gibson and other federal officials said Leal-Hernandez’s extradition was based on a joint HSI/ Drug Enforcement Administration investigation that began in 2012.

HSI agents now 'supporting the nation's whole-of-government immigration enforcement efforts,' official says

One senior U.S. law enforcement official said no current DHS officials want to voice concern publicly because the Trump administration has launched numerous probes and disciplinary actions against suspected leakers of internal policy changes.

“In the same way other federal law enforcement agencies and the Department of Defense are currently supporting the nation’s whole-of-government immigration enforcement efforts, ICE is focusing all its law enforcement personnel on mitigating public safety threats and preserving the integrity of our immigration laws,” McLaughlin told USA TODAY.

Technically, the Homeland Security Investigations division has always resided within ICE, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, one of the main agencies within the sprawling Department of Homeland Security that was established soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to better protect Americans from domestic and foreign threats.

But HSI has fought for years for independence from ICE, saying its almost singular focus on what's known as Enforcement and Removal Operations has sharply undercut its ability to investigate crimes that have little or no connection to illegal immigration – including transnational criminal networks in the United States and around the world.

That was especially the case in California and “sanctuary cities” like New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles that prohibit or limit their police departments and government officials from cooperating with ICE for fear of helping in the deportation of undocumented residents.

Cappannelli, who retired in 2022, and MacDonald, who retired in 2013, said HSI's association with ICE, including using ICE email accounts, letterhead and even raid jacket insignias, hamstrung their efforts to cultivate sources and informants.

Years of efforts to separate HSI from the 'undue toxicity' of ICE and its deportation efforts

Trump's promise to deport millions of immigrants during his first presidency had made HSI's association with ICE exponentially worse, they said, especially in its efforts to fight drug cartels and conduct major investigations in the country's biggest cities.

Many HSI officials wrote a protest letter in 2018, asking then-Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen to break up ICE because other jurisdictions were agreeing to partner with HSI only if “the ‘ICE’ name is excluded from any public facing information,” The Washington Post reported at the time.

Then, in December 2021, senior HSI agents sent an internal report to President Joe Biden's DHS secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, urging him to let them become a standalone agency divorced from ICE. They cited 77 instances in which HSI's affiliation with ICE “had hurt relations with state and local law enforcement, colleges and universities, and community groups, making it difficult to recruit new agents and build trust with victims of crime,” The Post reported.

Last April, HSI announced a crucial victory in that effort, gaining its own website scrubbed of any links to ICE. They also got new email addresses and raid jackets for agents in 220 cities in the U.S. and 80 locations overseas, and even a team of publicists and other officials to help with their “rebranding,” the senior federal law enforcement official told USA TODAY.

HSI's new "independent branding" would allow its agents "to work without the undue toxicity that in some places comes with the ICE moniker," Patrick Lechleitner, ICE's acting director at the time, told The Washington Post.

"They'll still be part of ICE, just like the Marines are part of the Department of the Navy," Lechleitner said then.

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In recent weeks, though, the HSI agents have been told they are now migrating back to the old system, in which they and the enforcement and removal agents are all focusing on deportations.

The massive redeployment of HSI agents was also recommended by Project 2025, the sweeping and controversial policy blueprint for Trump's second term that Trump distanced himself from on the campaign trail but has since adopted in large measure.

It said DHS should "refocus HSI on immigration offenses and criminal offenses typically associated with immigration (for example, human trafficking). All criminal investigative work without a clear nexus to the border or otherwise to Title 8 should be turned over to the appropriate federal agency."

Cappannelli said one HSI agent involved in complex multi-agency criminal investigations is now chasing border crossers out of a remote station in Eagle Pass, Texas. He said he fears the wholesale redeployment of agents will have a devastating effect on ongoing investigations and prosecutions that require their continued assistance.

"Imagine one of these guys having to tell a prosecutor, 'Hey I can't make it to court to testify on your case because I'm at the border'" looking for undocumented immigrants.

