

Policy Number: 10075.1
FEA Number: 306-112-0026

Office of the Director

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
500 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20536



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

June 17, 2011

MEMORANDUM FOR: All Field Office Directors
All Special Agents in Charge
All Chief Counsel

FROM: John Morton
Director 

SUBJECT: Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion Consistent with the Civil
Immigration Enforcement Priorities of the Agency for the
Apprehension, Detention, and Removal of Aliens

Purpose

This memorandum provides U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel guidance on the exercise of prosecutorial discretion to ensure that the agency's immigration enforcement resources are focused on the agency's enforcement priorities. The memorandum also serves to make clear which agency employees may exercise prosecutorial discretion and what factors should be considered.

This memorandum builds on several existing memoranda related to prosecutorial discretion with special emphasis on the following:

- Sam Bernsen, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) General Counsel, Legal Opinion Regarding Service Exercise of Prosecutorial Discretion (July 15, 1976);
- Bo Cooper, INS General Counsel, INS Exercise of Prosecutorial Discretion (July 11, 2000);
- Doris Meissner, INS Commissioner, Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion (November 17, 2000);
- Bo Cooper, INS General Counsel, Motions to Reopen for Considerations of Adjustment of Status (May 17, 2001);
- William J. Howard, Principal Legal Advisor, Prosecutorial Discretion (October 24, 2005);
- Julie L. Myers, Assistant Secretary, Prosecutorial and Custody Discretion (November 7, 2007);
- John Morton, Director, Civil Immigration Enforcement Priorities for the Apprehension, Detention, and Removal of Aliens (March 2, 2011); and
- John Morton, Director, Prosecutorial Discretion: Certain Victims, Witnesses, and Plaintiffs (June 17, 2011).

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The following memoranda related to prosecutorial discretion are rescinded:

- Johnny N. Williams, Executive Associate Commissioner (EAC) for Field Operations, Supplemental Guidance Regarding Discretionary Referrals for Special Registration (October 31, 2002); and
- Johnny N. Williams, EAC for Field Operations, Supplemental NSEERS Guidance for Call-In Registrants (January 8, 2003).

Background

One of ICE's central responsibilities is to enforce the nation's civil immigration laws in coordination with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). ICE, however, has limited resources to remove those illegally in the United States. ICE must prioritize the use of its enforcement personnel, detention space, and removal assets to ensure that the aliens it removes represent, as much as reasonably possible, the agency's enforcement priorities, namely the promotion of national security, border security, public safety, and the integrity of the immigration system. These priorities are outlined in the ICE Civil Immigration Enforcement Priorities memorandum of March 2, 2011, which this memorandum is intended to support.

Because the agency is confronted with more administrative violations than its resources can address, the agency must regularly exercise "prosecutorial discretion" if it is to prioritize its efforts. In basic terms, prosecutorial discretion is the authority of an agency charged with enforcing a law to decide to what degree to enforce the law against a particular individual. ICE, like any other law enforcement agency, has prosecutorial discretion and may exercise it in the ordinary course of enforcement¹. When ICE favorably exercises prosecutorial discretion, it essentially decides not to assert the full scope of the enforcement authority available to the agency in a given case.

In the civil immigration enforcement context, the term "prosecutorial discretion" applies to a broad range of discretionary enforcement decisions, including but not limited to the following:

- deciding to issue or cancel a notice of detainer;
- deciding to issue, reissue, serve, file, or cancel a Notice to Appear (NTA);
- focusing enforcement resources on particular administrative violations or conduct;
- deciding whom to stop, question, or arrest for an administrative violation;
- deciding whom to detain or to release on bond, supervision, personal recognizance, or other condition;
- seeking expedited removal or other forms of removal by means other than a formal removal proceeding in immigration court;

¹ The Meissner memorandum's standard for prosecutorial discretion in a given case turned principally on whether a substantial federal interest was present. Under this memorandum, the standard is principally one of pursuing those cases that meet the agency's priorities for federal immigration enforcement generally.

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- settling or dismissing a proceeding;
- granting deferred action, granting parole, or staying a final order of removal;
- agreeing to voluntary departure, the withdrawal of an application for admission, or other action in lieu of obtaining a formal order of removal;
- pursuing an appeal;
- executing a removal order; and
- responding to or joining in a motion to reopen removal proceedings and to consider joining in a motion to grant relief or a benefit.

Authorized ICE Personnel

Prosecutorial discretion in civil immigration enforcement matters is held by the Director² and may be exercised, with appropriate supervisory oversight, by the following ICE employees according to their specific responsibilities and authorities:

- officers, agents, and their respective supervisors within Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) who have authority to institute immigration removal proceedings or to otherwise engage in civil immigration enforcement;
- officers, special agents, and their respective supervisors within Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) who have authority to institute immigration removal proceedings or to otherwise engage in civil immigration enforcement;
- attorneys and their respective supervisors within the Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA) who have authority to represent ICE in immigration removal proceedings before the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR); and
- the Director, the Deputy Director, and their senior staff.

ICE attorneys may exercise prosecutorial discretion in any immigration removal proceeding before EOIR, on referral of the case from EOIR to the Attorney General, or during the pendency of an appeal to the federal courts, including a proceeding proposed or initiated by CBP or USCIS. If an ICE attorney decides to exercise prosecutorial discretion to dismiss, suspend, or close a particular case or matter, the attorney should notify the relevant ERO, HSI, CBP, or USCIS charging official about the decision. In the event there is a dispute between the charging official and the ICE attorney regarding the attorney's decision to exercise prosecutorial discretion, the ICE Chief Counsel should attempt to resolve the dispute with the local supervisors of the charging official. If local resolution is not possible, the matter should be elevated to the Deputy Director of ICE for resolution.

² Delegation of Authority to the Assistant Secretary, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Delegation No. 7030.2 (November 13, 2004), delegating among other authorities, the authority to exercise prosecutorial discretion in immigration enforcement matters (as defined in 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(17)).

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Factors to Consider When Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion

When weighing whether an exercise of prosecutorial discretion may be warranted for a given alien, ICE officers, agents, and attorneys should consider all relevant factors, including, but not limited to—

- the agency's civil immigration enforcement priorities;
- the person's length of presence in the United States, with particular consideration given to presence while in lawful status;
- the circumstances of the person's arrival in the United States and the manner of his or her entry, particularly if the alien came to the United States as a young child;
- the person's pursuit of education in the United States, with particular consideration given to those who have graduated from a U.S. high school or have successfully pursued or are pursuing a college or advanced degrees at a legitimate institution of higher education in the United States;
- whether the person, or the person's immediate relative, has served in the U.S. military, reserves, or national guard, with particular consideration given to those who served in combat;
- the person's criminal history, including arrests, prior convictions, or outstanding arrest warrants;
- the person's immigration history, including any prior removal, outstanding order of removal, prior denial of status, or evidence of fraud;
- whether the person poses a national security or public safety concern;
- the person's ties and contributions to the community, including family relationships;
- the person's ties to the home country and conditions in the country;
- the person's age, with particular consideration given to minors and the elderly;
- whether the person has a U.S. citizen or permanent resident spouse, child, or parent;
- whether the person is the primary caretaker of a person with a mental or physical disability, minor, or seriously ill relative;
- whether the person or the person's spouse is pregnant or nursing;
- whether the person or the person's spouse suffers from severe mental or physical illness;
- whether the person's nationality renders removal unlikely;
- whether the person is likely to be granted temporary or permanent status or other relief from removal, including as a relative of a U.S. citizen or permanent resident;
- whether the person is likely to be granted temporary or permanent status or other relief from removal, including as an asylum seeker, or a victim of domestic violence, human trafficking, or other crime; and
- whether the person is currently cooperating or has cooperated with federal, state or local law enforcement authorities, such as ICE, the U.S. Attorneys or Department of Justice, the Department of Labor, or National Labor Relations Board, among others.

This list is not exhaustive and no one factor is determinative. ICE officers, agents, and attorneys should always consider prosecutorial discretion on a case-by-case basis. The decisions should be based on the totality of the circumstances, with the goal of conforming to ICE's enforcement priorities.

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That said, there are certain classes of individuals that warrant particular care. As was stated in the Meissner memorandum on Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion, there are factors that can help ICE officers, agents, and attorneys identify these cases so that they can be reviewed as early as possible in the process.

The following positive factors should prompt particular care and consideration:

- veterans and members of the U.S. armed forces;
- long-time lawful permanent residents;
- minors and elderly individuals;
- individuals present in the United States since childhood;
- pregnant or nursing women;
- victims of domestic violence, trafficking, or other serious crimes;
- individuals who suffer from a serious mental or physical disability; and
- individuals with serious health conditions.

In exercising prosecutorial discretion in furtherance of ICE's enforcement priorities, the following negative factors should also prompt particular care and consideration by ICE officers, agents, and attorneys:

- individuals who pose a clear risk to national security;
- serious felons, repeat offenders, or individuals with a lengthy criminal record of any kind;
- known gang members or other individuals who pose a clear danger to public safety; and
- individuals with an egregious record of immigration violations, including those with a record of illegal re-entry and those who have engaged in immigration fraud.

Timing

While ICE may exercise prosecutorial discretion at any stage of an enforcement proceeding, it is generally preferable to exercise such discretion as early in the case or proceeding as possible in order to preserve government resources that would otherwise be expended in pursuing the enforcement proceeding. As was more extensively elaborated on in the Howard Memorandum on Prosecutorial Discretion, the universe of opportunities to exercise prosecutorial discretion is large. It may be exercised at any stage of the proceedings. It is also preferable for ICE officers, agents, and attorneys to consider prosecutorial discretion in cases without waiting for an alien or alien's advocate or counsel to request a favorable exercise of discretion. Although affirmative requests from an alien or his or her representative may prompt an evaluation of whether a favorable exercise of discretion is appropriate in a given case, ICE officers, agents, and attorneys should examine each such case independently to determine whether a favorable exercise of discretion may be appropriate.

In cases where, based upon an officer's, agent's, or attorney's initial examination, an exercise of prosecutorial discretion may be warranted but additional information would assist in reaching a final decision, additional information may be requested from the alien or his or her representative. Such requests should be made in conformity with ethics rules governing

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communication with represented individuals³ and should always emphasize that, while ICE may be considering whether to exercise discretion in the case, there is no guarantee that the agency will ultimately exercise discretion favorably. Responsive information from the alien or his or her representative need not take any particular form and can range from a simple letter or e-mail message to a memorandum with supporting attachments.

Disclaimer

As there is no right to the favorable exercise of discretion by the agency, nothing in this memorandum should be construed to prohibit the apprehension, detention, or removal of any alien unlawfully in the United States or to limit the legal authority of ICE or any of its personnel to enforce federal immigration law. Similarly, this memorandum, which may be modified, superseded, or rescinded at any time without notice, is not intended to, does not, and may not be relied upon to create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law by any party in any administrative, civil, or criminal matter.

³ For questions concerning such rules, officers or agents should consult their local Office of Chief Counsel.