

Hundreds protest in Little Village after Federal Immigration Raid

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In what could be a warm-up for a planned immigration march next week, about 300 protesters shouted and waved signs for several hours in Little Village on Tuesday after a federal raid inside a shopping plaza.

Officials described the afternoon raid as a crackdown on a ring suspected of selling fake identification in the Southwest Side neighborhood, part of a years-long effort to control a persistent problem connected to illegal immigration.

Neighborhood residents and local activists, however, saw the action in the heart of Chicago's Mexican community as an attempt to intimidate people in advance of a planned May 1 march to Daley Plaza in protest of recent federal raids nationwide.

Word of the Tuesday raid quickly spread through the neighborhood, with organizers of next week's march arriving with ready-made signs, drums and megaphones. The crowd closed the intersection of 26th Street and Albany Avenue for hours, chanting in a semicircle as Chicago police directed traffic away.

"They're trying to scare us," said Juan Luis Martinez, 22, a Little Village resident, predicting the action would pull more people into the streets next Tuesday. "It won't work."

Among the protesters were some witnesses, who said that as many as 16 people were arrested when agents toting rifles and dressed in bulletproof vests stopped about 150 shoppers and workers inside the Little Village Discount Mall.

Officials declined to confirm the numbers or the details of the raid, saying a news conference is scheduled Wednesday at the Chicago U.S. attorney's office. FBI spokesman Ross Rice said the investigation involves a search warrant for records.

Federal agents long have considered the Little Village area home to a thriving trade in illegal IDs and have made several arrests during sweeps over the years.

Recently, the trade has evolved to include stolen Social Security numbers, according to a federal affidavit filed in connection to a raid this month in Beardstown, Ill.

Local residents acknowledged the illegal activity, attributing it to the desperation some illegal immigrants have to find work.

But the manner in which the action was taken—in daylight as parents walked children home from school—inflamed the community.

Baltazar Enriquez, 27, was at the mall to buy shoes after leaving his construction job when about 60 agents stormed in and shut down all the stores, he said. The agents, carrying pictures of suspects, lined up people against a wall and checked to see whether if they had anyone they were looking for, Enriquez said.

"It was everybody who looked Latino," he said. When one burly agent asked him for identification, Enriquez said he responded in English: "I'm shopping. Why do you need to know my status?"

The agent, he said, ordered Enriquez to clear out.

Marisol Iniguez, an employee at the mall, that features a thrift store, a Walgreen's pharmacy and a Chicago health clinic, said agents kicked open bathroom doors with guns drawn.

"They treated us like criminals," she said.

Jorge Mujica, a lead organizer of next week's march, watched protesters waving signs and chanting in front of a brick gateway arching across 26th Street that welcomed visitors to Little Village's normally bustling commercial strip.

"This is our Sensenbrenner this year," Mujica said, referring to the catalyst for marches across the country last year after Wisconsin congressman James Sensenbrenner proposed federal legislation that would have made assisting illegal immigrants a felony.

During a week when organizers have been trying to spread the word about the march, "they're doing the work for us," Mujica said, referring to federal immigration officials.

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