

FINDING A “SAFE HARBOR” AMONG THE “ICE” STORMS

By: [Laurie M. Chess](#)

As we reported in August of 2006, the Department of Homeland Security (“DHS”) proposed a rule broadening the definition of an employer’s “constructive knowledge” of hiring or employing an alien unauthorized to work in the United States. More than one year after the publication of the proposed rule, DHS has issued its final rule, one which Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) is expected to use with DHS to audit employers and prosecute them for knowingly hiring or continuing to employ aliens unauthorized to work. This year, while Congress has debated and proposed various immigration reform packages, the only real action taken has been on the enforcement side, and more employers are feeling the effects of this every day. Thus, now more than ever, it is important to know what steps to take to remain in compliance with the current immigration laws.

To reach the harbor:

The “safe harbor” gives employers a series of steps to take in response to a “no match” or “mismatch” letter from: (1) the Social Security Administration (“SSA”), in which the employer is told that the information in its databases does not match the name or Social Security number for particular employees as reported on earning reports filed by the employer; or (2) DHS, in which the employer is notified that the immigration status employment authorization documentation presented by the employee in completing the I-9 form was not assigned to the employee, according to DHS records. Employers who receive these notices from SSA or DHS may now be deemed to have constructive knowledge that the individual who is the subject of the notice is not authorized to work in the U.S. To avoid being deemed with constructive knowledge, the employer can take these steps to be able to use the “safe harbor” defense:

(1) **Within 30 days of receipt of the notice/no-match letter:** You must check your own personnel and payroll records to see whether the discrepancy was due to a clerical error on your part. If that is the case, you need to make the correction, notify SSA of the correction, verify that SSA made the change and that the new information matches their records, and make a record of the manner, date, and time of such verification. You must retain the record with the employee’s I-9 form.

If there is no clerical error on your part, then ask the employee whether the information you have in your records is correct. If the employee claims the information is correct, you should direct the employee to the nearest SSA office and ask him or her to resolve the discrepancy with the SSA. As a practical matter, it is a good idea to document your meeting with the employee, what you tell him or her, and that the employee has agreed to follow up with the SSA. If the employee claims the information is not correct, then you should correct your records and verify that the employee’s name and Social Security number now match SSA’s

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discharge the employee. If, however, you do not acquire first-hand knowledge, but rather another employee or supervisor tells you that another employee is not authorized to work, you should conduct an investigation into this matter (as you would other workplace investigations) and you may proceed with the above steps during the pendency of the investigation. If you are not able to conclude that the employee is unauthorized to work, you may still utilize the “safe harbor” defense.

When the “safe harbor” takes effect:

The final rule may be published in the Federal Register any day now. The rule then takes effect 30 days after the date of publication. You should use this time to review the status of your I-9 compliance and review your process for addressing and responding to “no-match” letters. Also, continue to be vigilant about “no-match” letters in the merger and acquisition context in accordance with your review of the other company’s immigration compliance.

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Remember that these legal principles may change and vary widely in their application to specific factual circumstances. You should consult with counsel about your individual circumstances. For further information regarding these issues, contact:

Sidney F. Lewis, V
Labor & Employment Practice Group Leader
Jones Walker
201 St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana 70170-5100
504.582.8352
504.589.8352 (fax)
slewis@joneswalker.com

Jones Walker's Labor & Employment Attorneys

H. MARK ADAMS¹
KEVIN O. AINSWORTH
JENNIFER L. ANDERSON³
NORMAN E. ANSEMAN, III
JOHN C. BLACKMAN, IV
TIMOTHY P. BRECHTEL
SUSAN K. CHAMBERS
LAURIE M. CHESSE²
AMY C. COWLEY
JENNIFER L. ENGLANDER
REBECCA G. GOTTSEGEN
VIRGINIA WEICHERT GUNDLACH
JANE H. HEIDINGSFELDER

CORNELIUS R. HEUSEL
THOMAS P. HUBERT
MARY ELLEN JORDAN
TRACY E. KERN
JENNIFER F. KOGOS
JOSEPH F. LAVIGNE
SIDNEY F. LEWIS, V
CHRISTOPHER S. MANN
OLIVIA S. REGARD
RICHARD R. STEDMAN, II
PATRICK J. VETERS
ROBERT B. WORLEY, JR.³
ALIA S. WYNNE

¹ Also admitted in Mississippi
² Also admitted in Florida

³ Also admitted in Texas