



IMMIGRANT  
DEFENSE  
PROJECT



## BRIEFING GUIDE: ICE CITIZENS ACADEMY PROGRAMS

Released October 1, 2024

The “Citizens Academy” program run by the Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is a little-known public relations initiative launched under the Obama administration, and expanded nationally during the Trump administration. Citizens Academy programs include a multi-week curriculum and “real life” simulation scenarios that cultivate xenophobia and vigilantism. In September 2020, ICE [canceled its plan](#) to launch a pilot “Citizens Academy” program in Chicago under its Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) after immigrants’ rights groups and community members mobilized against it. To our knowledge, ICE has not run other Citizens Academies in any locations since. The Chicago ICE Citizens Academy was modeled on existing programs operated by ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI); Chicago’s would have been the first run by ERO, the agency component directly responsible for the arrest, detention, and deportation of immigrants.

These FOIA documents were uncovered by Immigrant Defense Project (IDP) and Organized Communities Against Deportations (OCAD) along with their legal counsel Beyond Legal Aid, the Center for Constitutional Rights and Latino Justice PRLDEF, through the lawsuit [Organized Communities Against Deportations v. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#).

### KEY FINDINGS:

- [Violence and firearms training are at the center of the Citizens Academy curriculum](#): Civilian volunteer participants are trained with multiple types of guns and spend hours at firing ranges. They are taught law enforcement tactics including the use of deadly force and role-play scenarios as ICE agents, conducting fictional “raids” on immigrants.
- [Key goal of the Citizens Academy program is for ICE to develop “positive media coverage” including recruitment of journalists to Academies](#): ICE specifically recruits journalists for Academies with the goal of shaping media coverage.
- [ICE is strategic about the so-called community “stakeholders” selected to attend these Academies](#): Employees of banks and people connected to law enforcement are heavily represented at Citizens Academies.

In this current moment of widespread racist and violent sentiment towards immigrants from local and nationally elected officials, not to mention ongoing [civilian vigilantism](#) against immigrants, it remains ever more pressing that the public learns what their tax dollars are funding and in what violent tactics and harmful anti-immigrant sentiments ICE is training hand-selected participants., The ICE Citizens Academy program should be permanently shut down.

## ***Brief and notorious history of Citizens Academies***

- ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI)-specific Citizens Academies [were developed in 2013 and launched in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 2014](#). The academies were “fully implement[ed]” nationwide in 2019. According [to an internal memo](#), key goals of these programs are to push back against the “current negative opinion that exists toward our agency,” which ICE believes is “fueled by harmful headlines or political views” rather than ICE’s ongoing racism and violence against immigrant communities.
- Goals of the Citizens Academy programs include helping to protect “officer safety” and to “chang[e] the narrative” surrounding ICE. According to HSI Executive Associate Director Derek Benner, [“over the course of a 7 to 10 week program, \[Citizens Academy\] attendees participate in a variety of activities that will give them a glimpse of what it is like to walk in the shoes of an HSI special agent. The participants conduct mock investigations, learn defense tactics and even participate in mock surveillance.”](#)
- [ICE intends for Citizens Academy](#) programs to extend the reach of the agency. ICE aims for the Citizens Academy to “brand the agency with the community while the agency learns from the community” and “*serve[] as a force multiplier* by creating awareness of our mission and developing an information network.” [emphasis added]
- The six-week inaugural Chicago ERO Citizens Academy, set to be launched in September 2020, was [“modeled after” the HSI academies](#), as well as other Citizens Academy programs run by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies.
- Documents show that [over 30 ICE Citizens Academies were planned for 2020](#).
- Records received via FOIA show ICE planning, running and/or discussing Academies which took place in New York City (multiple times), Chicago, Austin, Los Angeles, Tampa, Dallas, Atlanta, San Antonio, Charlotte (NC), Denver, San Juan, St. Paul/Minneapolis, Kansas City, Miami, El Paso, Philadelphia, and Tucson/Phoenix.
- In general, Academies were attended by anywhere from 10-20 people, for instance, this email recruiting people to the inaugural Los Angeles Academy says [they plan for 12-15 participants](#), while the inaugural [New York Academy had 19 participants](#).

## ***Violence is at the center of Citizens Academy trainings***

- Multiple, detailed firearm trainings were produced through the FOIA litigation.
  - An [undated HSI firearms training](#) includes numerous slides detailing how to shoot a gun, including with images on how to properly hold pistols, align one’s eye in shooting one, and images of looking through a pistol at a target.

- [A different HSI training for participants details how to point guns](#), shooting fundamentals, complete with standing positions, and an image labeling the parts of a semi-automatic pistol.
- A [third HSI firearms training from 2019 in Atlanta](#) included drills shooting at mannequins that looked like humans, including an hour of practice with [M4 rifles](#).
- Participants are not only trained on using guns but are often instructed on shooting them. *Military-level rifles* as well as handguns are made available for participants to shoot at firing ranges. A [schedule for the Kansas City academy](#) lists several types of weapons that will be available to shoot – “P320 pistols, [MP5 pistol](#), [M4 rifle](#) [and a] Shotgun.
- A key experience for each Academy is for participants to have hands-on trainings with these weapons; [ammunition is included in course materials’ cost](#).
- ICE does not hide that they train civilians to shoot firearms at these Academies. It has used photos of people holding guns as part of its publicity, both in its own materials and [those given to reporters](#).
- Participants in at least one academy were given the option to arrive early at the shooting range so that they [“will be able to use our firearms a bit more.”](#) ICE also seems to be aware that individuals who could be attracted to the Citizens Academy program may already be armed, advising participants to “leave any personal weapons in your vehicle” before entering a firing range.
- Citizens Academies include [training on ICE’s official guidelines for “use of force,”](#) which covers use of deadly force against immigrants. One slide suggests that “Use of Force is not a 50 /50 proposition. Officers always stack the cards in their favor. ‘The HOUSE’ always wins . . . YOU are the house!”
  - A different [PowerPoint suggests](#) yelling “drop the gun” as potential cover for using deadly force: “WHEN IN STREET CLOTHES, DUE TO LIABILITY ISSUES ANYTIME YOU ENGAGE A TARGET, ESPECIALLY IN A DEADLY FORCE SITUATION, YOU NEED TO IDENTIFY WHO YOU ARE, POLICE, DROP THE GUN, **WHILE DRAWING AND FIRING ON THE TARGET.**” (emphasis added).
  - [The same presentation includes a slide titled “SURVIVAL”](#) with phrases that seem taken from a Hollywood war movie: “NEVER EVER GIVE UP, NEVER CONCEDE DEFEAT, I Will NOT DIE THIS WAY, I MUST GO HOME TO MY FAMILY, HOW YOU TRAIN IS HOW YOU WILL FIGHT.”
- [Participants are shown detailed images on where to strike someone with a baton or weapon to cause different levels of harm.](#)
- Documents show how ICE works with local law enforcement on Citizens Academies - including in sanctuary cities that have policies prohibiting collaboration between ICE and local law enforcement.
  - In New York, [ICE reached out to the New York City Police Department](#) (NYPD) for permission to use the NYPD's firing range for the Citizens Academy.
  - In Seattle, the firearms training in October 2019 was [held at the Seattle Police Department Athletic Association](#).

- [One email chain](#) about a Kansas City Citizens Academy from October 2019 refers to a so-called “takedown night” happening at Kansas City Police Department’s “training shoot house” and the need for K-9 units to be present if possible.

### ***Key goal is “positive media coverage” and recruitment of journalists***

- [An internal brochure created after the first ICE HSI Citizens Academy](#), held in San Juan in 2014, notes how graduates later helped put together a four-part television series showcasing ICE. The brochure reads, “The branding of the agency in the special report was such and the messaging so accurate that the production seemed [to] be taken out from the public affairs site of the Department.”
  - In a [summary of Academy “Success Stories,”](#) HSI’s Tampa office notes that “relationships formed with the citizens have brought positive media coverage as several alumni are members of the media.”
- In several emails, ICE agents seem excited to have [recruited journalists and members of media outlets](#) to take part.
  - In Texas, [one ICE agent writes that “Telemundo would like to have TWO reporters participate.”](#) Two other ICE agents respond with “Nice!! Citizens Academy here we come!!!” and “Yay!”
  - An [email chain from California notes that a reporter at The Los Angeles Times](#) covering an ICE-related issue in 2019 had an “eye-opening experience” after participating in the Los Angeles Citizens Academy, linking that experience to why she’s been helpful in covering ICE since. Her positive coverage for ICE gets excited reactions from officers, with quotes such as “We (HSI) are very pleased,” and “Great proactive article.”
  - An [email chain from Texas specifically invites a local ABC affiliate \(KVUE\)](#) to attend the upcoming September 2019 academy.
  - An [email chain among HSI agents in Tuscan, Arizona, discusses whether to have three or four members of the press](#) attend an upcoming Citizens Academy.

### ***ICE is strategic about the so-called community “stakeholders” selected to attend***

- [A 2022 “Communications Plan” lists](#) the priority types of people ICE is hoping to recruit to its academies: “Media, Hill, Academic leaders, Business/community leaders, Prosecutors and local and state law enforcement, Local citizens, Non-governmental organizations.”
- Despite claiming that ICE’s HSI and ERO Citizens Academies were extended to community “stakeholders,” emails reveal that they were not truly open to the public.
  - One ICE [internal communications email chain](#) from July 2020 regarding the Chicago ERO Academy included a note that local ICE field offices involved in HSI Citizens Academies “did not want an open call to the public for academy participants. Instead they relied on existing community relationships.”
  - A [separate internal communications email chain](#) from March 2019 regarding the national expansion of the HSI Citizens Academies noted that ICE intentionally reworked outreach “so

we were not hosting an open call to the public... *We have to tread lightly on this point if asked how members of the public can participate.*" [emphasis added]

- A [third internal email from April 2019](#) specifically lists, as part of an overview about setting up a Citizens Academy: "Don't cast a wide net for recruitment. Have managers and agents target industries and NGO's we work with (media, clergy, NGO's, victim witness, etc.) - Idea is to build and strengthen relationships." Staffers connected to legislators at the national and state level have attended trainings. [Emails show Texas Governor Abbott was invited in 2019 to give the "keynote" speech](#) for a training in Austin, TX. That training apparently included three congressional staffers, including one from Senator Ted Cruz's office.
- The significant redactions to training materials and other documents that have been released, as well as the refusal by ICE to release the names of many of the businesses and organizations, not to mention individuals, who have participated in these Academies belies their supposedly transparent and "community"-oriented purpose. For example, despite participants signing a release form letting ICE use any photographs taken, ICE redacted the images of those involved.
- Many of the participants' job titles and organizational / business affiliations have been redacted by ICE so that IDP and OCAD are not able to see exactly where they are employed. [A redacted list from the Seattle HSI Citizens Academy in 2019](#) shows that participants were affiliated with World Affairs Council, Costco, Starbucks, Liberty Shared, BECU, International Rescue Committee, and Hughes Group.
- Bank employees made up a seemingly significant portion of ICE academy attendees.
  - [An ICE brochure](#) highlights the fact that the first academy in San Juan was "composed of 10 citizens representing the banking and security industries, as well as the academia and the media." Documents showed employees at Bank of America, Standard Chartered Bank of New Jersey, US Bank, and more.
  - Production revealed that some banks received specialized trainings – [one PowerPoint presentation is titled "Homeland Security Investigations New York – US Bank Citizen's Academy 2020."](#)
  - Another [email from ICE officers recruiting for the Tucson Academy](#) asks, "just keep me updated on the bank people."
  - Bank employees are aware of this as well. [A December 2018 email](#) from Head of Investigations at Standard Chartered Bank notes how much their employees took away from participating in a previous year, noting that "at least one of them is now a Federal Agent with USPIS" (US Postal Inspection Service, a law enforcement agency within the postal service) and referring four employees for an upcoming academy.
- In a March 2020 email, after notifying recipients that the Seattle Citizens Academy would be postponed (presumably because of COVID), an ICE officer referred to the academies as ["an effective tool for changing the hearts and minds of our stakeholders. Let's plan to hit it hard in FY21!"](#)