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What are Homeland Security agents doing on DART trains and platforms?

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Angelica Andrade's phone screen lit up.

"REPORT OF ONGOING ICE Activity..." a text message on her screen read.

The immigrants rights activist had been tipped off that Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents might be conducting an operation in downtown Dallas, so she drove in to verify the claim on the morning of July 23.

She found several uniformed men with guns strapped to their waists standing at the Dallas Area Rapid Transit St. Paul train station.

They weren't asking any questions, Andrade said, but she understood how these agents, who wore black vests that read "Department of Homeland Security POLICE" across the chest and back, could easily be mistaken for ICE agents.

Activists like Andrade say the presence of these agents might cause confusion for immigrants and their families who use public transit in Dallas, and at least one DART board member said she would like to know more about what these teams actually do and possibly push for reexamining the transit agency's relationship with these agents.

So who are these agents and what exactly are they tasked with doing?

The agents are members of the Transportation Security Administration's Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response team, or VIPR. TSA is an agency housed under DHS.

These teams are deployed at the request of agencies like DART "to augment law enforcement capabilities to mitigate terrorist risk to the traveling public," said Thomas Kelly, Assistant Supervisory Air Marshal in Charge with TSA's Federal Air Marshal Service, via email.

Gordon Shattles, DART's director of external relations, said that the agents conduct "high visibility" patrols about four times a year in Dallas and are always partnered with DART police officers. TSA VIPR teams have been working with DART since 2005. DHS created the VIPR teams in response to the Madrid and London train bombings in 2004 and 2005, respectively.

To his knowledge, Shattles said, VIPR agents have never themselves arrested anyone while on patrol in Dallas.

He added that the VIPR teams' patrols on DART provide training opportunities that these agents typically don't get. They also often patrol during the State Fair of Texas, including Texas-OU weekend, and on festive days like St. Patrick's Day.

"D-FW is a fantastic opportunity for these teams to train, DHS has told us. We have it all: light rail, airports, bus terminals," Shattles said.

But DART board member Dominique Torres said she'd like to know more about what the VIPR teams are actually charged with doing and what, if any, enforcement capacities they have.

She added that she would like to see what the agreement between DART and DHS looks like to quell any concerns DART riders might have in the future.

Torres said she received calls and text messages on July 23 from Dallas City Council members, a Texas state representative and concerned community members about the possibility that "ICE was on the train."

She said she wasn't sure what to make of it, so she reached out to DART leadership and learned that the teams were out on patrol and were not conducting any immigration removal operations.

"I want our community members to be aware that we do understand the fear that having the VIPR teams on our platforms caused. It scared a lot of people who didn't know what they were doing or who they were and we want to be cognizant of that," Torres said.

TSA VIPR agents were out again last week on the morning of Aug. 20, Torres confirmed. She said she received a notice from DART officials last weekend and posted a notice on Twitter and Facebook.

The July sighting of these agents came in the weeks after President Donald Trump announced that massive ICE raids would be kicking off around the U.S., Torres said. It was just bad timing, she added.

Immigrant families were on high alert after Trump's late June announcement that nationwide ICE sweeps would remove "millions" of unauthorized immigrants from the U.S. if Congressional Democrats didn't agree to change the nation's asylum laws, something Trump has previously referred to as a "loophole."

Torres said that given the times, the relationship between DART and DHS may need a second look.

"We do need to reexamine our relationship from a culturally sensitive standpoint. I fully understand the need for vigilant officers and we do want to make sure we are prepared. We can be vigilant but sensitive at the same time," Torres said.

Shattles said that riders shouldn't be concerned about the TSA VIPR agents' presence on the platforms and added that DART "will never have ICE doing enforcement on our platforms."

Likewise, Kelly with TSA said these agents are highly trained Federal Air Marshals who "do not conduct immigration actions."

But the overall efficiency and purpose of these VIPR teams is questionable, said Patrick Eddington, a DHS and national security expert with the libertarian Cato Institute.

Eddington said that he isn't aware of any time when a TSA VIPR team has actually foiled a terrorist attack at any transportation hub around the country. That's mainly because these teams often don't have any actual intelligence to act on and are instead operating as simple patrol units, he said.

"They're basically roving Fourth Amendment violations squads searching people without probable cause or warrants," Eddington said.

TSA did not respond to concerns about violations of the Fourth Amendment, which constitutionally protects people against unlawful search and seizure.

Andrade said there needs to be more transparency about these VIPR teams, even if their patrols are limited throughout the year. She would like for DART to publicly announce when these patrols will be out and about to avoid any unnecessary fear that may spread throughout Dallas' immigrant community.

"They should let the community know from here on out, especially now because there's a real fear in the community. If it's training, what is it for? What are taxpayers paying for?" Andrade said.