

Colorado Deputy Faces Legal Action for Alleged Breach of Immigration Data Laws

July 23, 2025

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In a significant legal development in Colorado, Attorney General Phil Weiser has initiated a lawsuit against Mesa County Sheriff's Deputy Alexander Zwinck, accusing him of unlawfully sharing personal information with federal immigration authorities. The action, filed on Tuesday, centers on allegations that Zwinck provided sensitive details about a 19-year-old nursing student with an expired visa, facilitating her arrest by federal agents. This case

highlights ongoing tensions between state and federal authorities over immigration enforcement policies, with Colorado's strict laws limiting local cooperation under scrutiny.

The lawsuit claims that on 5 June, Deputy Zwinck shared the student's driver's licence, vehicle registration, and insurance details in a Signal chat used by a regional drug task force, which includes officers from federal Homeland Security Investigations (HSI). After learning the student had no criminal history but an expired visa, Zwinck allegedly disclosed her location, detained her briefly in his patrol car, and provided federal agents with her vehicle description and direction of travel. The lawsuit notes that Zwinck later congratulated the agents on the arrest, with one HSI officer praising him as a candidate for "interdictor of the year" for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's removal division.

Further allegations suggest Zwinck violated state law again on 10 June by sharing another driver's licence photo and vehicle details with immigration officers, aiding another arrest. In a message cited in the lawsuit, Zwinck reportedly joked about receiving "bitchin Christmas baskets" from federal agents for his assistance. These actions, according to Weiser, contravene a recently expanded Colorado law prohibiting local government employees from sharing identifying information with federal immigration officials. The law, extended earlier this year to cover local agencies, aims to restrict cooperation in immigration enforcement, a policy that has drawn legal challenges from the federal government.

Weiser emphasised the state's commitment to enforcing these restrictions, stating in a recent interview, "This law is not optional. It's a requirement, and we take it seriously." His office is also investigating whether other task force members have engaged in similar breaches, raising concerns about systemic issues within multi-agency operations. The lawsuit seeks a judicial order declaring Zwinck's actions unlawful and prohibiting future violations, though it does not pursue fines permitted under the statute.

The Mesa County Sheriff's Office, where Zwinck is employed, has refrained from commenting directly on the lawsuit. Spokesperson Molly Casey indicated that an internal investigation into the 5 June traffic stop is nearing completion, with a statement expected within a week. Zwinck has been placed on paid leave pending the outcome, and the sheriff's office has removed all employees from the Signal group chat involved in the incidents. Efforts to contact Zwinck directly were unsuccessful, and Casey declined to provide details of any legal representation.

This case underscores the broader conflict between state and federal priorities on immigration enforcement. Colorado's laws, designed to limit local involvement, have sparked legal pushback from federal authorities, who argue they impede national immigration policy. As the investigation into the task force continues, the outcome of this lawsuit could set a precedent for how strictly such state laws are enforced, particularly in regions where local and federal agencies collaborate closely. For now, the focus remains on ensuring compliance with Colorado's legal framework, as Weiser's office seeks to uphold the state's stance against unauthorized data sharing.