

Coder deletes open source add-on for Chef in protest over ICE contract



Enlarge / Open source ingredients borked some Chef users' systems because of an ICE protest by one developer.

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On September 17, Seth Vargo—a former employee of Chef, the software deployment automation company—found out via a tweet that Chef licenses had been sold to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) under a \$95,500, one-year contract through the approved contractor C&C International Computers & Consultants. In protest, Vargo decided to

“archive” the GitHub repository for two open source Chef add-ons he had developed in the Ruby programming language. On his GitHub repository page, Vargo wrote, “I have a moral and ethical obligation to prevent my source from being used for evil.”

That move, according to an all-hands email sent out by Chef CEO Barry Crist—later published on the company’s website—“impact[ed] production systems for a number of our customers. Our entire team has worked to minimize customer downtime and will continue to do so until we restore services to 100% operation.”

Crist faced backlash internally from employees over the deal. The work, he pointed out, had begun in 2014, well before the current administration implemented the child detention policies that Vargo was protesting. “For context, we began working with DHS-ICE during the previous administration to modernize their IT practices with agile and DevOps,” Crist wrote.

He continued:

While I understand that many of you and many of our community members would prefer we had no business relationship with DHS-ICE, I have made a principled decision, with the support of the Chef executive team, to work with the institutions of our government, regardless of whether or not we personally agree with their various policies... My goal is to continue growing Chef as a company that transcends numerous U.S. presidential administrations.

But today, Crist shifted his position. In a new message to staff, he said, “After deep introspection and dialog within Chef, we will not renew our current contracts with ICE and CBP when they expire over the next year. Chef will fulfill our full obligations under the current contracts.”

Crist added that revenues from the current contracts would be “directed to charities that help vulnerable people impacted by the policy of family separation and detention.”

While Chef is hardly as high-profile as Google and Microsoft—other technology companies that have recently seen employees revolt over government contracts—the action is notable because it was triggered in part by how tied to the open source community around the platform the company is.

This isn't the first time that an angry developer has had an oversized impact on a development-platform company. In February 2016, a developer named Azer Koçulu yanked his Node.js code from the npm repository in protest over a name for one of his modules being re-assigned. He briefly brought down hundreds of projects across the Internet for a few hours while other developers scrambled to fill in the missing libraries.

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