

## **POLES RIP AID GROUP IT'S A HOAX, THEY SAY**

Daily News (New York)

August 06, 1995, Sunday

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**Section:** News; Pg. 13

**Length:** 500 words

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### **Body**

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Angry Polish immigrants are pressing claims that the Polish-American Legal Defense and Education Fund is out to bilk them, not help them with immigration problems.

Since its inception two years ago, with its respectable name and a Fifth Ave. office, the nonprofit fund has promoted its mission as one of helping newcomers from Poland settle here.

Wayne Brison, spokesman for Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, whose staff met in late July with fund clients who claim they were scammed, **said** the district attorney is "reviewing the complaints."

The immigrants former lawyers, engineers, nurses and teachers from Poland **say** PALDEF, headed by Irene Wachulewicz, a Polish immigrant herself, has bilked them of large sums of money with a variety of schemes.

"They made me pay \$ 20,000 and promised to sponsor me for a green card. They never did," **said** Alicja Paszkowska, who demonstrated with a dozen people outside PALDEF last week.

"I keep calling but they would not return my money."

"This is only the tip of the iceberg. There are many many more behind them," Elizabeth Baumgartner, a consumer advocate and columnist for a Polish-language daily, **said** of the protesters.

"Many are ashamed and think they don't have any rights."

Michael Zukowski, PALDEF's lawyer, declined to comment on the charges from Paszkowska and other victims who spoke to the Daily News.

"My clients deny all the garbage that has been attributed to them," **said** Zukowski.

A CUNY law school graduate, Wachulewicz, who is not a lawyer, has worked as a paralegal and has operated travel services in New York and Connecticut.

Many of the complaints against her date to as many as six years ago, when Wachulewicz ran a company called Kolbe Consultants.

Her clients **said** they were attracted to PALDEF by its ads in Polish papers that claim to offer "licensed temporary or permanent jobs opportunities . . . legal services."

They ended up paying PALDEF from a few hundred to thousands of dollars for help in getting green cards, U.S. professional licenses or service to bring their loved ones to the U.S. from Poland.

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Since the victims went public with their grievances in Polish newspapers 10 days ago, they have been contacted by other PALDEF clients. The organizers have compiled five pages of the names of alleged victims and their grievances.

Malgorzata Mierzejewska, a physical therapist who has paid PALDEF \$ 3,000 for a green-card application, **said** nothing has been done for her. She is seeking to recover her money in small claims court, where a hearing is scheduled next month.

Margaret Hess, a mother of two who worked as a secretary at PALDEF last year, **said** she was fired when she pressed for \$ 600 in back wages the agency owed her.

"When I was there, people would call up and **say**, 'We didn't get what we paid for; we want our money and documents back,' " **said** Hess.

"They were coming to the office and waited for hours, but Irene would not see them."

## Graphic

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Irene Wachulewicz

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (90%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (89%); FRAUD & FINANCIAL CRIME (89%); LAWYERS (89%); PUBLIC PROSECUTORS (89%); MIGRATION ISSUES (78%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (78%); LEGAL SERVICES (78%); PARALEGALS (78%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (78%); WAGES & SALARIES (76%); BACK PAY (76%); CONSUMER PROTECTION (76%); LAW SCHOOLS (73%); SUITS & CLAIMS (73%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (73%); DISMISSALS (71%); CONSUMER LAW (71%); HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS (70%); CONSUMER WATCHDOGS (70%); GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS (69%); LICENSES & PERMITS (66%); WRITERS (66%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (61%); PHYSICAL THERAPY (61%); SMALL CLAIMS COURTS (60%)

**Industry:** LAWYERS (89%); LEGAL SERVICES (78%); PARALEGALS (78%); LAW SCHOOLS (73%); HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS (70%); GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS (69%); WRITERS (66%)

**Geographic:** NEW YORK, NY, USA (79%); NEW YORK, USA (79%); CONNECTICUT, USA (53%); UNITED STATES (92%); POLAND (88%)

**Load-Date:** September 11, 1995