

Man charged in immigrant fraud case

St. Petersburg Times (Florida)

February 13, 2000, Sunday

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Section: LARGO TIMES; Pg. 1

Length: 876 words

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Dateline: CLEARWATER

Body

(ran SS edition of METRO & STATE)

In a rare move, illegal **immigrants** decide not to suffer in silence and fear, and turn to Clearwater police for assistance.

All David Mendoza wanted was a decent place of his own, a rental apartment for himself and his nephew.

The 28-year-old Mexican had sneaked across the border last year and came to Clearwater, leaving behind a wife, two daughters, six brothers and a sister.

Living in a cramped, one-bedroom apartment with five other Mexican **men**, Mendoza works 62 hours a week at a carwash and sends money back to his family. In October, he had scraped together \$ 965 for what he thought would be a new place to live.

MEXFRAUD

Instead, Mendoza, 28, was ripped off by a **man** accused of preying on at least 15 Mexicans who paid thousands for apartments and identification documents that never materialized. When the victims tried to get their money back, the **man** - who was born in Puerto Rico - threatened to turn them in to federal immigration authorities.

In a rare move, Mendoza and the other illegal **immigrants** turned to Clearwater police last month for help. They decided not to suffer in silence and fear, which is the usual response among local Mexicans when they are victimized.

"With not having the proper papers, they're so vulnerable," said Alex Emmanuelli, founder of Uno Federation Community Services, a non-profit agency supporting the local Hispanic population. "You hear through the grapevine of scams and problems with them, but it doesn't go beyond their community."

Not this time. Based on information from Mendoza and other Mexicans who lost money, Clearwater detective Ramon Cosme arrested Luis Cruz, 47, on Jan. 26 on a **charge** of scheming to defraud victims who paid a total of more than \$ 6,000 for documents and apartments Cruz was never in a position to provide.

For Mexicans who are here illegally to seek such law enforcement assistance is almost unique, said Peter Schweitzer, a priest formerly at St. Cecelia Catholic Church and a founder of La Clinica Guadalupeana, which provides free medical care for the Hispanic community.

"I can't think of another time this has happened, unfortunately," Schweitzer said. "It's a step in the right direction. They typically fear the police and equate them to INS."

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Most of the victimization he has encountered has involved employers. There have been instances, Schweitzer said, where he has intervened when women were being sexually exploited by employers who figured that because the Mexicans were in the country illegally, they would be too afraid to report the crime to police.

Cruz also counted on that, Cosme said.

"These (Mexicans) got taken advantage of," said Cosme, who speaks Spanish. "They all paid in cash, and he told them he would use his credit to get them apartments. He was supposed to have a friend he would take them to for an ID card and told them it would cost \$ 350. Nobody knows who this buddy was, and I don't think he existed."

The victims were skittish, he said, because Cruz's threats made them afraid they would be deported. That fear already has sent one victim into hiding. Cosme said there are more victims, but they have not come forward.

Cruz, who was released from jail on his own recognizance, did not respond to requests for an interview.

Cosme credited Rodolfo Scherer, a Hispanic notary who is familiar to the Mexican community, with convincing the Mexicans to go to police. Scherer, who is from Argentina, operates Ixmiquilpan, a Mexican grocery on Drew Street.

Scherer helps Mexicans send money to their families and cope with things such as getting paid with bad checks. In many cases, he said, Mexicans pay fees amounting to 10 percent to 15 percent of their paychecks to get them cashed because they have no identification or bank accounts.

When he found out about Cruz's activities, Scherer confronted him at a Clearwater apartment complex where he worked and lived. He made Cruz sign a notarized promissory note for the money Mendoza paid him and persuaded the victims to go to the police.

Mendoza has shown the handwritten document to Cosme and keeps it in his pocket. He made a dismissive noise through pursed lips and smiled when asked, through an interpreter, if he is afraid now of Clearwater police.

"No," said Mendoza.

Police Chief Sid Klein views that as one small victory. In a city where about 15 percent of the population is Hispanic - mostly Mexican - he is trying to bridge cultural, language and other gaps with various programs.

One thing is certain: Clearwater police are not interested in turning people in to immigration authorities.

"That's not our job," Klein said. "Our efforts are aimed at looking for solutions for a problem that is falling into our laps. We have stopped participating in roundups."

Soft-spoken and stocky, Mendoza readily admits he is an illegal immigrant. He still works at a Palm Harbor carwash seven days a week, making \$ 5.40 an hour. Each month, he sends about \$ 700 to his family in Oaxaca.

It took Mendoza more than a month to save the \$ 965. He plans to see the case through to its end.

"I will go to court and testify," Mendoza said firmly.

- Times staff photographer John Pendygraft contributed to this report.

Graphic

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, JOHN PENDYGRAFT; David Mendoza, 28, vacuums a car at a Palm Harbor carwash, where he works seven days a week to send money home to family in Mexico. (ran LA SE CT NT, CITY & STATE, TAMPA & STATE)

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (90%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); ARRESTS (78%); **FRAUD** & FINANCIAL CRIME (78%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (77%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (69%); CATHOLICS & CATHOLICISM (65%)

Geographic: PUERTO RICO (79%)

Load-Date: February 14, 2000

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