

For Immigrants, Help Can Be Risky; Maryland Lawmakers Move to Rein In Consultants Who Overreach and Sometimes Get Clients Deported

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Body

Mariana C. Cordier, president of the **Maryland** Hispanic Bar Association, has heard an increasing number of complaints over the past year from people who say their immigration applications were botched by **consultants**.

"The demographics have changed so much that you start to see these things happening more and more," said Cordier, a Rockville attorney. The growing number of Hispanics in the area has given rise to a number of immigration **consultants**, she said.

Consultants say they provide a useful service, because they understand the immigration application requirements and charge less than lawyers to **help** with the paperwork. But Cordier said that in some cases, immigration **consultants** have failed to file the correct papers, causing their **clients** to be **deported**.

The **Maryland** General Assembly this month passed legislation that would give people who use immigration **consultants** more protection. California, Washington, New Mexico and a handful of other states already have laws that regulate immigration **consultants**, but the District and Virginia do not, according to the National Consumer Law Center.

The **Maryland** legislation, known as the Immigration Consulting Services Act, awaits Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s signature. The bill's lead sponsor, Del. Kathleen M. Dumais (D-Montgomery), said she expects him to sign it in the next few weeks. Even if he vetoes it, she said, the act has enough support to override a veto. It passed the House 121 to 5 and the Senate unanimously.

The legislation curbs the services immigration **consultants** are allowed to perform and the claims they may make. Penalties include a fine of up to \$1,000 or a year in prison. Victims also have the right to sue to recoup the money they paid to the immigration **consultant** and to collect damages.

Dumais said she has heard from a wide range of **immigrant** communities that have been affected by **consultants**, including people from Latin America, Vietnam and Africa.

Some immigration **consultants** say they welcome the oversight. Patrick Tzeuton, an attorney and the owner of Immigration **Consultants** Inc. in Silver Spring, said his company caters to people who have recently **moved** to the

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area from Cameroon, in West Africa. Services are offered mostly in French. Two lawyers work in the office with four immigration consultants who file forms for visa extensions or work documents.

Many immigrants like to use the consultants because they are cheaper than lawyers, said Tzeuton. "It is no different than going to a pharmacist or a nurse instead of a doctor."

Vincent Rosario, an accountant, notary and consultant, said he is careful how he advises people who come to him for help with immigration applications. Rosario runs his business, Crusa Servicios Latinos, from his home in the District and also works from an office in Sterling. He charges customers \$75 to \$100 to help them complete an application for a temporary visa to bring a relative to the United States. If a customer has more complicated issues or wants a work visa, he said he refers them to a lawyer.

"I don't play with that. I don't give legal advice," said Rosario, who emigrated from the Dominican Republic 20 years ago. "If I do give advice, I let them know that it is not official."

Some immigrant advocates and lawyers said other consultants do more. Immigration consultants are a particular problem among the Spanish-speaking population because of the use of the Spanish word notario, said Kimberly Propeack, director of advocacy at Casa de Maryland, a Takoma Park nonprofit that works with Latino immigrants.

Many immigration consultants are notaries, and in some parts of Latin America a notario may conduct certain legal proceedings. In the United States, notary publics only administer oaths and attest to the authenticity of signatures. Sometimes notarios here say they can provide legal advice and help prepare immigration forms.

"This is one of the biggest legal issues in our community," Propeack said. "They are really quite blatant."

Jayesh Rathod, a staff attorney at Casa de Maryland who is working on three cases of immigration applications that were fouled up by consultants, said he thinks the new law will have a deterrent effect. "Up to now, I've seen almost nothing done about such problems," he added.

Rathod is trying to help Carlos Gomez, who moved to Alexandria from El Salvador, get a work permit. Gomez paid an immigration consultant in Falls Church \$30 to fill out his visa application. When U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services sent him a card requesting more information, he took it to the consultant, whose name he no longer remembers.

"She told me they were crazy and that I didn't have to send in the information," Gomez said in Spanish. "I trusted her, and then I got another card saying they had denied me."

Other immigrants testified about their problems before Maryland legislators during the bill's hearings. Amy Nunez, a Mexican immigrant who lives in Frederick, told legislators that her husband, who came to Maryland without legal documents, was deported to Mexico after they enlisted the help of an immigration consultant who took \$3,000 from them and fled, according to Cordier.

The recently passed bill would force immigration consultants to return any documents that a customer gives them. In some instances, consultants have refused to provide copies of the paperwork they claim to have filed with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, some lawyers said.

The bill also makes it illegal to advertise that a notary license allows a person to provide legal advice and requires that immigration consultants provide a contract in both English and the customer's native language before working on the customer's behalf. It also prevents consultants from saying they can obtain special favors from U.S. immigration agencies and from collecting money from clients before they perform any services. Immigration consultants must also post signs in their offices stating that the consultant is not a licensed attorney and cannot give legal advice or services.

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