

Opinion: Federal agencies are going after fraudulent immigration advisers

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Body

It is a lesson that many victims of **immigration** services fraud learn too late: The wrong kind of help can actually hurt.

Across the country, scam artists are targeting immigrant communities -- deceiving and defrauding hardworking individuals who are trying to navigate the system. Sometimes known as "notarios," they pose as lawyers or offer "professional" assistance with applications for **immigration** benefits -- all in exchange for large upfront fees. They may advertise on the Internet or at a bus stop, or find clients via word-of-mouth. But these fraudsters are not licensed or qualified to offer the services they advertise. And unsuspecting clients who invest their trust, time and money end up with nothing.

One victim of this type of scam was "Aaron," a U.S. citizen and a member of the U.S. Army in the Los Angeles area who wanted to help his father, who had lived legally in the U.S. for many years, gain permanent residence status. Aaron was hopeful when someone recommended an **immigration** lawyer. When they met, the person gave Aaron an official-looking business card and a contract. He said he'd take the case for \$500, assuring Aaron that it was an easy one.

When his father's day in court came, however, the lawyer was nowhere to be found. Only **after** his father lost his case did Aaron learn he had been dealing with a man using a fake name and impersonating a licensed attorney.

Fighting this kind of fraud is at the heart of the Combating **Immigration** Services Scams Initiative, a new multi-**agency** partnership announced last week by the Department of Justice, the Department of Homeland Security and the **Federal** Trade Commission. We will be working together to educate people about how to avoid **immigration** services scams, empower victims to come forward and get help, and take action against the fraudsters themselves. By sharing information and aligning priorities, we will greatly increase our effectiveness at stopping these predators.

As part of this initiative, over the past year, U.S. Attorneys' Offices across the nation have vigorously prosecuted dozens of cases like Aaron's. In addition, the Department of Justice's Civil Division, through its Office of Consumer Protection Litigation, is pursuing civil and criminal cases against people who make false and misleading promises. The justice department is also working to train more attorneys to help victims of **immigration** services fraud while helping people get honest and competent legal help from the start.

At the same time, Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and **Immigration** Services has entered into an agreement with the FTC to use the FTC's Consumer Sentinel database, a secure online database, as the central repository for consumer complaints and law enforcement leads about **immigration** services fraud. By funneling critical data into one place, the agreement will greatly enhance information-sharing among **federal**, state and local law enforcement **agencies**.

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Immigration Services has worked diligently with stakeholder groups in seven partner cities -- Los Angeles, Fresno, San Antonio, Detroit, Baltimore, New York, and Atlanta -- to develop materials to alert immigrant communities about these scams, inform them about the legal process and provide information about where to find legitimate legal advice and representation.

Despite these efforts, we still need your help.

Before paying for **immigration** services, check www.uscis.gov/avoidscams and learn how to verify any claims being made. And if you are already a victim of someone posing as an **immigration** "professional," report the crime to your state attorney general and to the **Federal** Trade Commission at www.ftc.gov/complaint. Working together, we can stop these scams, prosecute those who are responsible and make sure people can find the legitimate help they need.

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