

Pair arrested for immigration fraud scheme; Watsonville and Soquel residents among those duped

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Body

June 29--SAN DIEGO -- A Tijuana, Mexico, man who told undocumented aliens in **Soquel** and **Watsonville** he could help them get United States citizenship -- for a price -- was actually running an **immigration fraud scheme** with a New Mexico woman, authorities announced Monday.

Armando Garcia, 58, and Elizabeth Alcocer, 47, both were charged with a 16-count federal indictment for conspiracy, mail **fraud** and aggravated identity theft-related crimes this month, the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office reported.

Garcia is suspected of taking at least \$120,000 from eight to 10 Santa Cruz County **residents**, and the **pair** allegedly were running their **fraud** operation in other areas as well, according to Robin Gysin, who runs the Consumer Affairs division at the D.A.'s Office.

Garcia and Alcocer presented themselves, at various times, as "**immigration**" employees and officers, **immigration** attorneys, persons who could influence the actions of the U.S. Citizenship and **Immigration** Services, and **immigration** consultants to undocumented aliens seeking to legally **immigrate** into or legalize their status within the U.S., according to the D.A.'s Office.

The yearlong investigation culminated June 21 when both suspects were **arrested** by federal **Immigration** and Customs Enforcement agents. Garcia and Alcocer face federal prison time, fines, restitution and asset forfeiture if convicted.

"I think it's a really worthwhile case and a really sad thing that went on," said Assistant

U.S. Attorney Rees F. Morgan, who is prosecuting the case.

However, Morgan declined to comment further on the case, including how many victims have been identified and in what other areas Garcia and Alcocer allegedly **duped** people. He also would not say if **fraud** victims who came forward to report the alleged crimes but are living in the U.S. illegally would be prosecuted.

In Santa Cruz County, Garcia may have used churches to gain people's trust. A **Soquel** man told Gysin that a priest had introduced him to Garcia in 2004 as someone would could help the man's family gain **immigration** status in the U.S. Garcia said it would cost \$20,000, according to Gysin.

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The **Soquel** man paid Garcia \$14,000 over a two-year period to cover the **immigration** costs for him, his wife and their child. At one point, the **Soquel** man even traveled to Pico Rivera to sign papers at Garcia's office, but the **immigration** numbers were different on each document, Gysin said.

It's suspected Garcia and Alcocer forged other people's names on valid **immigration** documents so the **pair** could show their clients that progress had been made on the cases.

"That's how he strung along victims," Gysin said. "He wasn't assisting them with legitimate **immigration** efforts."

The complaints came together when victims reported incidents to the Santa Cruz County **Immigration** Project and the **Watsonville** Law Center. About 10 victims have come forward in Santa Cruz County.

"We do expect once the word gets out that many, many more should surface," Gysin said.

Immigration fraud cases occur from time to time in the area, but Gysin said this one involves a lot more money than past **schemes**.

Gysin speculated the **pair** also may have been operating near the Mexican-U.S. border because Garcia was indicted in federal court in San Diego and Alcocer was arraigned in Albuquerque. They will be back in court Aug. 2.

ICE officials ask anyone with information about the **scheme** call 619-550-5229 to leave a confidential message.

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