

Suit Says Preacher Cheated Immigrants

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Body

On many Sundays last year, illegal immigrants crowded into the pews of the two-story Salvation Army church adjacent to town hall in this central New Jersey town to hear a charismatic preacher speak of God and offer promises to make them legal. Speaking in Spanish, he told the congregants, many of them Latinos, that if they each paid \$4,000 and gave \$500 donations to the church he could be their "bridge" to becoming Americans.

But according to a lawsuit filed on Friday in state court, the preacher, the Rev. Enoc Tito Sotelo, under the name of the Salvation Army, took their money without producing any results. The lawsuit, alleging a violation of New Jersey Consumer Fraud Law, names Mr. Sotelo, Jorge Sancho, a Salvation Army captain formerly assigned to the organization's nearby Bound Brook office, and the Salvation Army itself.

Gilberto Garcia, the lawyer representing the plaintiffs, said that Mr. Sotelo and Mr. Sancho used the Salvation Army's reputation to harm people who were seeking help. The Salvation Army, he said, should have known about their activities.

"It's the equivalent of an automobile dealer who has a crooked salesperson selling cars for them for a long period of time," Mr. Garcia said. Trish Pelligrini, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey chapter of the Salvation Army said that the organization had not seen the lawsuit and could not comment on its assertions.

But she said that after complaints about Mr. Sotelo and Mr. Sancho appeared last month in El Diario/La Prensa, the Spanish-language newspaper, the Salvation Army fired Mr. Sotelo. She said Mr. Sancho was dismissed from his job at the Bound Brook office last November. Both men have since moved out of the area and could not be reached for comment because their whereabouts were unknown.

Ms. Pelligrini said that she did not know the precise reasons for the dismissals. But she said that Major Stephen Banfield, the New Jersey Salvation Army's divisional commander, conducted an internal investigation into the complaints described in El Diario. Mr. Sotelo was fired after that investigation, she said. Major Banfield was not available for comment, she said.

Amy Gottlieb, program director of the American Friends Service Committee's Immigration Rights Program, said she expects that schemes to defraud immigrants are on the rise because Congress is debating legislation to crack down on illegal immigration.

"At a time when there are rumors of amnesty and debates about changes in the law, all along with continued raids and increased fears, desperation for the green card and legal status just increases," Ms. Gottlieb said. "People trust the Salvation Army and go to them when they are desperate and so this is particularly worrisome."

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Mr. Garcia **said** that the New Jersey Consumer Fraud Law does not bar illegal **immigrants** from filing lawsuits.

One of the plaintiffs, Angela Martinez, **said** in an interview that she and her husband were drawn to the Salvation Army Church in Plainfield after hearing other illegal **immigrants** describe a pastor who spoke of how, through prayer and the help of his well-known organization, he could help them obtain legal status.

"It wasn't secret," **said** Ms. Martinez, 35, a mother of three from Uruguay. "It was in the open so it had to be true."

In the court papers and in the interview, Ms. Martinez used her mother's family name. She normally uses her married name, but asked that it be withheld to protect her from deportation. Ms. Martinez **said** that Mr. Sotelo told them that for a cash payment of \$4,000 and a cash donation of \$500 to the church, he could arrange to have a lawyer in Florida help her husband obtain legal status. The pastor told them that they would have to fly at their own expense to Florida where he **said** the church had good contacts with immigration officials, she **said** in the interview.

Last June, she **said**, her husband paid \$15 for an identification card that stated that he worked with the Salvation Army, and was taken from the Plainfield church in a Salvation Army van to Kennedy International Airport. According to the lawsuit, the **immigrants** were told that the identification card and a T-shirt with the Salvation Army name and logo would allow them to avoid any questions about their immigration status at airport security points.

In West Palm Beach, Fla., Ms. Martinez's husband and about six others filled out immigration applications for "aliens of special ability." Her husband had worked detailing and customizing automobiles. But the **immigrants** never met with a lawyer they had been told would help them. It is not clear whether all of their applications were filed, the lawsuit **says**.

As their patience with Mr. Sotelo waned, the **immigrants**, contacted Carmen Zalavarietta, a board member of Centro Hispanoamericano of Plainfield, a non-profit community organization that helps illegal **immigrants** gain legal status and government benefits. She put the **immigrants** in touch with Mr. Garcia, the lawyer.

"They wanted to believe so badly," Ms. Zalavarietta **said**. "He told them that God had brought them this opportunity to get a green card."

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