

RED FLAG ON GREEN CARDS Nassau DA taking aim at phony immig lawyers

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Body

BETWEEN THE INSULTS and glares of their neighbors and getting kicked out of their overcrowded homes, life on Long Island for many Latino immigrants has been especially rough lately.

But that's just the start of their headaches - wait until they try to get a green card.

This week, Nassau County District Attorney Denis Dillon charged Clementina McDermott, 61, of Hicksville with defrauding Chilean and Colombian immigrants who sought her help getting green cards.

In an interview at her Hicksville home this week with the Daily News, McDermott insisted she is innocent.

"I didn't promise them a green card, because I don't give illegal green cards. I don't do anything illegal," said the Colombian-born defendant. "And I never - on my mother's grave - I never told anyone that I was a lawyer."

Lately, the debate over illegal immigration has landed squarely in Nassau and Suffolk counties. But attorneys, activists and authorities here said that when some immigrants try to legalize their status, tension with their neighbors is often just the beginning of their trials.

The unauthorized practice of law and false promises are "rampant in the field of immigration law," said Matthew Dunn, a Manhattan immigration attorney and past chairman of American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Many newcomers, he said, rely on the wrong people to lead them through the complicated world of immigration law. And those with illegal immigration status typically know little about the system.

Those two factors relegate many immigrants to the lowest levels of jobs and make them easy prey for false promises - often from members of their own ethnic community.

There are tales of employers who stiff workers on pay, inept income tax preparers who file error-riddled returns and fake lawyers who promise green cards, work permits, divorces and wills.

"When it comes time to deliver, they can't," Dunn said. "Or they just can't be found."

That often makes a bad situation worse for immigrants who haven't secured the right paperwork. Experts say phony professionals often give disastrous advice that can delay the immigration process and cause a lifetime of problems.

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Much of the problem is in translation. In many Latin American countries, a notario, or notary, also is an attorney.

In the U.S., many notarios never clarify for their clients that they are not licensed, legitimate lawyers, said Victoria Campos, a Huntington immigration attorney.

"This is a very vulnerable population that seeks solace from people who speak their own language," Nassau County Legislator David Mejias (D-North Massapequa) said. "There's a lot of fly-by-night organizations."

Mejias is so concerned about Latin-American immigrants getting the right information that every Wednesday, he gives Campos free office space at his Hempstead law firm to meet with potential clients in his district.

Campos said as many as 80% of her clients have sought assistance from notarios before coming to her.

"Immigration is for many immigrants the number one priority. They'll even go without eating to arrange their papers," Campos said. "It's very stressful for them."

Many immigrant advocates say there are not enough legitimate nonprofit organizations to give accurate information. Immigrants also often work so many hours with little flexibility that they don't have the time to get help, Campos said.

They also are unlikely to expose a charlatan out of fear that any exposure to police could put them at risk for deportation, Dunn said.

That has not stopped Dillon from pressing ahead with prosecuting individuals he has said are exploiting immigrants.

Last year, Santiago Taveras served time for filing fake divorces for immigrants out of his Copiague and Hempstead offices. In March, Virginia Gago was charged with bilking an immigrant out of nearly \$2,000 for a green card.

And in April, Dillon charged three contractors with stiffing dozens of day laborers out of \$50,000 in wages.

For McDermott's part, she swore that she never represented herself as an attorney and that she advised her clients on several occasions to hire an attorney to handle problems each had with DWI convictions and nonpayment of income taxes.

She said she simply wanted to help the immigrants get their green cards, so they could enlist in the military, as her son Kurth is doing as a Marine in Iraq.

"My lawyer said, 'Why are you so scared, Clementina? They have no case here,' " McDermott said. "I know I'm going to win because I've done nothing illegal."

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Graphic

Denis Dillon RICHARD SLATTERY Clementina McDermott shows documents she says proves she did not defraud Colombian and Chilean immigrants who sought her help in getting green cards.

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