

# **City Groups Battle Scams That Take Advantage of Immigrants' Fears Under Trump**

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## **Body**

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Jul 20, 2017( City Limits: <http://www.citylimits.org> Delivered by Newstex) Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead President Donald Trump delivers remarks on Wednesday, March 15, 2017, at the American Center for Mobility in Ypsilanti, Michigan. His anti-immigrant rhetoric might be making noncitizens less likely to report crimes, and more vulnerable to scams. For nearly all of 2015, Tony Nieves, a Bronx resident, pretended he was a high ranking United States Immigration and Customs Services agent, the last to sign off on deportations and capable of protecting people by offering them legal advice. He told them he had to collect thousands in legal fees to help.

In all, he defrauded immigrants in the Greater New York City area of at least \$15,000, according to court documents. In June, he was sentenced to six years in prison in a case supported by ICE. Nieves began operating before Donald Trump announced his candidacy in July 2015 by denouncing Mexican immigrants, but his scheme ran through December of that year and capitalized on a growing fear that if Trump were elected, the president would take a harsher stance on undocumented immigrants. Those fears proved valid in November 2016, and Trump has followed through with promises to increase deportation efforts. His policies have emboldened ICE as an agency, leading to arrests and deportations of non-criminal immigrants. While the debate has turned to whether cities can provide protection to residents regardless of immigration status, a practical issue has emerged in New York City: scams like the one carried out by Nieves flourish. Since Trump took office, fear has increased among immigrants in New York City — and that's made them more vulnerable to scams. While not all of these scams are specific to immigrants, the fear of deportation has led them to take risks in the interest of safety that they might not otherwise take. Undocumented immigrants and even green card holders are more likely to seek immigration protection from lawyers who aren't properly credentialed. This is in part because 'notarios' in Latin American and some South Asian countries are fully qualified lawyers, whereas in the United States they are not. Some notarios have taken thousands from residents and then allowed them to get deported anyway. City and private services are ramping up efforts and working together to protect these communities from financial scams that target them, but they're facing considerable logistical challenges. As fear has risen, so too have complaints to city agencies. Attendance at workshops has decreased as people fear government agencies will alert Immigration and Customs Enforcement to their presence. The work since Donald Trump took office has shifted to reassurance efforts as these agencies attempt to show communities they're there to help. This has led to increased collaboration between departments and a renewed energy to be present in immigrant communities. From nonprofit programs to city agencies to state offices, many groups are seeking to raise awareness about scams that target immigrants. Multiple departments have seen increased reports of scams since the election, as well as an overall increase in financial crimes. Even just a few weeks after the election, the New York Attorney General's office put out a statement highlighting the proliferation of scams. 'In the past two weeks, we've seen intense fear and anxiety in immigrant communities. New York has zero tolerance for anyone who would prey on that fear to defraud immigrants and their families,' State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman said at the time. The press release pointed to the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights as evidence in this trend, saying that after the election, the nonprofit saw a 266 percent increase in daily calls and 250 percent increase in walk-ins. Other entities

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like the New York Immigration Coalition, Qualitas of Life and the Department of Consumer Affairs have received more calls than usual about frauds targeting immigrants. DCA Commissioner Lorelei Salas says reports of abuse to her office had increased overall by 30 percent this year. Immigrants are particularly appealing targets for financial crimes because of language barriers, informal financial habits and fears that reporting their situation will lead to deportation or retaliation. Many work low-income, cash-based jobs, and don't have a bank account. One scheme is when people say they can help protect immigrants from legal action, despite either having no credentials as a lawyer or offering a fake legal fix. Carlos Davila, a Bronx businessman, was recently ordered to shut down his charity, A New Beginning for Immigrant Rights, after multiple investigations found that he had been distributing fake cards purporting to keep people from deportation, even though no such card exists. He was charging \$200 for each. Yet another is the ten-year visa scam, which is offered to immigrant communities by supposedly trustworthy legal advisers but has no basis in reality. 'They say that if you've lived here for ten years, you're eligible for this immigration relief,' says Vanessa Crowley of Qualitas of Life, a Hispanic-focused financial empowerment nonprofit. 'But really living here for ten years is just one of the prerequisites for a different immigration proceeding. And so the targets of this scam are unwillingly handing themselves over for deportation, actually, which is awful. Not only are they paying thousands of dollars to go through this process, but they just end up turning themselves in.' On top of these schemes, immigrants are also vulnerable to everyday financial crimes that have nothing to do with their residency status. Crowley says pyramid schemes and multi-level marketing commonly target immigrants. In response to these threats Qualitas of Life and the New York Immigration Coalition joined forces to create a personal finance guide for immigrants alerting them to scams and helping promote safer money habits, like banks that don't require immigration status and will accept IDNYC. Both programs, as well as DCA and many other services, hold regular workshops in the community addressing a wide range of topics from legal rights to finance management to consumer protection. Salas has been traveling to parent-teacher groups, senior centers and community forums to help increase her department's visibility in immigrant communities. She highlights that residents can submit complaints anonymously, without worrying about their immigration status. On top of an increased presence in communities, city services are also trying to show they're more aggressive in going after businesses and scammers. One scheme Salas pointed to was predatory used car dealerships that advertise heavily to the Hispanic community through print, online and radio spots. These operations target workers without credit who carry their money in cash, and might not know what a fair interest rate is for a car loan, so they're paying more than 20 percent in interest. 'We don't have a lot of dollars to spend on this particular campaign, and we are competing with an industry that markets very heavily, spends a lot of money on advertisements,' Salas says, referring to a DCA initiative to increase awareness about predatory loans through ads. 'So, they're giants compared to us. That's one challenge.' While her office can't prosecute anyone, they do take away licenses, issue fines and collaborate with the district attorney's office to help bring charges against criminal practices. Salas says DCA's handling of the Davila case was in part to show other lawyers not to sell fraudulent immigration cards. But these services, both nonprofit and government, face steep challenges in addressing the problems. The largest is language. According to the city's website, more than 200 languages are spoken here, meaning considerable resources have to be spent on translation and interpretation services. Documents like tip sheets have to be written in as many languages as possible. Salas says her department consistently does more than they are required to in this area, but that means they translate a document into six languages. Some programs, like Qualitas of Life, focus on one language community to better engage within that group. Another challenge comes from social media. Services are seeing more scams advertised online, meaning they have to adjust their approach — being out in the community isn't enough, but they also have to devote resources to online campaigns that combat fraudulent ads. Some challenges are simply logistical. 'Our team is small and we cannot make it to all the events and all the know-your-rights workshops,' says Mayra Aldás-Deckert with the New York Immigration Coalition. Even when they can make it to workshops, there's been a renewed need to establish trust in communities. Since the election, according to Nilbia Coyote from Qualitas of Life, fewer people have ventured out at night to attend educational programs. Representatives from each organization described how the best way to combat these fears is to work together on projects and remain active within communities to build trust. 'We're definitely spending much more time in being public about the work that we can do,' Salas says, 'and reassuring people that we're still open for business.' In higher-profile cases like Tony Nieves's impersonation of an ICE officer, federal offices will get involved. Nieves was arrested after an investigation by ICE and other federal agencies into his practices. A spokesperson with ICE, Rachael Yong Yow, declined to comment on whether the department's increased focus on deportations has spurred a culture of fear among immigrants, but she offered a set of bullet points for how to deal with fake ICE

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agents: ● If members of the community are approached by someone purporting to be a federal immigration officer, they should respectfully request to see the person's badge and credentials. ● If the individual is unable to present a badge and credentials it should raise a red flag. People should also be suspicious if the 'officer' demands money or if he/she detains someone and refuses to disclose where they are being taken. ● If members of the community suspect they've been contacted by an 'imposter' immigration officer, they should report the encounter immediately to local law enforcement and/or call ICE's 24-hour toll free tip line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE.

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