

Deaf Mexicans in N.C. not captives, lawyer says as federal search widens

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Body

Two of 17 **Mexicans** detained in **North Carolina** may be "an active part of the ring" that allegedly smuggled **deaf Mexicans** into the United States and forced them to sell trinkets in Chicago, New York and **North Carolina**, investigators **said** Sunday.

More raids are possible this week, **said** Thomas Fischer, district director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service's Atlanta office. "We are following three extremely strong leads," he **said**. He would **not** be more specific about more raids or possible connections between the groups.

Ten people in New York and Chicago have been charged with conspiring to smuggle, harbor and conceal **deaf Mexicans** who were put to work selling \$ 1 key chains. They were held in virtual slavery in New York but in more humane conditions in Chicago, **federal** investigators **said**.

No charges have been filed in **North Carolina**. Because of language barriers, INS officials have interviewed only a few of those taken into custody Friday after a raid on two homes in Sanford, **N.C.** Authorities **said** the **Mexicans** were being held in "involuntary servitude."

But a Sanford immigration **lawyer** who represents the **deaf Mexicans** in **North Carolina** **said** they were **not** held against their will, kept in inhumane conditions or exploited in any way. "They all seem to be good friends," **said** attorney John Snow. "They all kept their own money and pooled expenses. There was no boss or ringleader."

Snow **said** he has **not** been inside the houses where the **Mexicans** lived. Authorities **said** blankets covered the windows and they were crowded i inside, sleeping on bunk beds.

Sanford apparently was the headquarters for a ring that operated throughout the state. During the day, the **Mexicans** were bused to shopping malls, where they sold trinkets, officials **said**.

Snow **said** one Mexican had been working in New York but moved to **North Carolina** because he heard conditions were better.

"He **says** he was mistreated in New York, but nothing of the kind happened down here," Snow **said**.

Snow **said** people moved freely in and out of the houses in Sanford. "There are Americans who supported them. They had **deaf** American friends who went in and out of the house freely.

"Jehovah's Witnesses went in and out of there. They all went on shopping sprees. There is no evidence of anything akin to slavery."

The attorney **said** he was **not** sure how long the **Mexicans** had been working in **North Carolina**. "I've heard anywhere from months to two to three years," he **said**. There are three minors in the **North Carolina** group who are

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not deaf, Snow **said**. One, an 18-month-old boy named Joshua, was born in the United States and is therefore a citizen. His mother is with the group, which is being held in protective custody at a motel in Charlotte.

Snow **said** he was hired by David Campos of Sanford, whose parents and two brothers were detained in Friday's raids.

Campos, who is married to a **deaf** American, has served as an interpreter during Snow's meetings with the **Mexicans**.

Four sign language interpreters were used during the raid, but Fischer is still trying to find seven to 10 more who can help INS officials interview the **Mexicans**.

"We only had a couple people available over the weekend to help us process these individuals," **said** Fischer, adding that he may have to look outside **North Carolina** to find qualified sign language interpreters. "You must be trained to be able to do this," Fischer **said**. "It will take up to 10 hours to interview each person."

Because of the language barriers, it may take the rest of the week for INS investigators to finish interviewing the **Mexicans**, Fischer **said**.

"Since we're dealing with people who only communicate through sign language, it's laborious," he **said**.

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