

Immigration lawyer in court on federal charges

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A disbarred attorney and his wife, who used to serve southwest Kansas' immigrant population, face federal charges for allegedly filing forged documents with U.S. authorities.

James Phillips, who previously practiced in Liberal, Garden City, Wichita and Great Bend, made his first appearance Friday in U.S. District Court in Wichita and pleaded not guilty. His wife, Alicia Morales-Phillips, was arrested July 14 in Texas and has yet to appear in court in Kansas.

U.S. Attorney Eric Melgren in January filed eight felony counts against Phillips and Morales-Phillips, charging them with filing false documents with the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The prosecutor filed another eight parallel counts, charging each with creating false immigration documents, as well.

The indictments against the two - who last lived in Mesquite, Texas, according to federal authorities - had been sealed since January, but they were released last week after Phillips' arrest.

Now, Phillips, 62, is free on a \$10,000, personal recognizance bond and a new court date has yet to be set. Phillips' attorney, Dan Monnat, said his client - now back in Wichita - will "vigorously" defend himself against the charges.

For her part, Morales-Phillips, 53, must be extradited to Kansas to face a judge here. The latest paperwork in her case indicates she remains in Mesquite.

Phillips had served Kansas' immigrant population at his various offices and his wife worked alongside him. In 2004, however, the Kansas Supreme Court disbarred Phillips, stemming in part from his apparent mishandling of four immigration cases.

A state disciplinary body charged he incompetently represented clients, did not keep them up to date on their cases and failed to refund legal fees when required.

Even setting aside the federal indictment, Morales-Phillips faces legal woes of her own.

The Kansas attorney general's office filed a civil suit against her in 2004, alleging she misrepresented herself as an attorney. Broadly, the suit states the woman took advantage of her customers' lack of English proficiency and understanding of U.S. law, filing legal documents on their behalf that contained mistakes.

Morales-Phillips never responded to the suit, and a judge in Barton County District Court issued a default judgment, ordering her to pay \$700,000. A spokeswoman in the attorney general's office said state prosecutors still are searching for the woman's assets so they can collect.

In the latest charges, federal authorities allege that Phillips and his wife presented seven applications for alien employment certification bearing forged signatures. They say the two also filed an application for asylum with a forged signature.