



UPLC: Illegal immigrants victimized by phony attorneys in Houston

by Jeff McShan / 11 News

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HOUSTON—Every day, people looking for a better life cross the border into Texas illegally.

As soon as they arrive, many of them begin seeking out immigration attorneys, hoping to begin the long, difficult process to legally remain here.

On Houston's southwest side, a part of town many immigrants call home, legal advice is everywhere. Dozens of ads can be found in area newspapers.

"It is a breeding ground for immigration lawyers and would-be immigration lawyers," said Denis Ducran.

Ducran and John Grayson are civil attorneys for Cokinos, Bosien & Young. They are also members of the Texas Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee.

They said there is a widespread problem of bad advice coming from people claiming to be attorneys in Houston.

"Before I became a lawyer I was an architect; and working in the construction

industry I was surprised to learn a lot of people acting as architects without the authority to do so, and when I became a lawyer I was completely shocked that people were doing the same thing with law," Ducran said.

The Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee or UPLC was formed by Texas' Supreme Court to investigate people who are providing legal services without a license.

Members of the UPLC provide their time and services free of charge.

"When I joined the committee it was kind of shocking at the damage that these unlicensed people can do," said Grayson.

Take the case of Harry Patel. He owned and operated a company on Hillcroft called U.S. Immigration Counseling Services Inc.

The committee said Patel was billing and providing legal services without a license—services that often left his clients helpless and broke.

"We believe he was serving a community of people, that not only don't know any better, in terms of who can practice law and who can't, but also a community of people who might be afraid to come forward and complain about him," said Ducran.

Nevertheless, the committee received many complaints. Some of them came from legitimate lawyers who the victims eventually had to hire to fix the problems Patel created.

In August 2002, a Harris County judge handed down a permanent injunction ordering Patel to stop.

In court documents obtained by 11 News, Patel signed an agreement to no longer advertise that he offers counseling to immigrants.

He agreed not to represent them and not to help them fill out legal immigration forms.

Despite that, the UPLC said Patel has resurfaced and is breaking the law again.

"The committee received further complaints against Mr. Patel and we filed another action to hold him in contempt," said Ducran.

Patel could spend time in jail.

"The committee's purpose is not retribution, not to get people fined, but just to stop the improper conduct," Grayson said.

Three weeks ago, the UPLC and attorney Harry Gee placed an ad in an Asian newspaper, called the Indo American News, informing people that Patel was under investigation again. The ad was placed because investigators want to hear from any of his clients who might be out there.

So that they're not discouraged to come forward, the victims' names are always kept confidential. But even with that guarantee, the UPLC believes it's just scratching the surface when it comes to the problem of fake lawyers. Committee members fear most victims never complain at all.

The UPLC said their latest case involves Helen Romero.

Ironically, she has an office near Patel, although 11 News could never find her there or anywhere else.

11 News was able to contact her over the phone, and she clearly said she was not practicing law.

But the UPLC said simply saying you're not an attorney won't necessarily clear your name.

The committee said Romero was conducting immigration-related business only a licensed attorney is allowed to do.

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