

\$15 million award in Oakland immigration scam

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Updated 4:57 pm, Thursday, November 21, 2013

The city of Oakland won a record \$15.1 million civil judgment against a bogus immigration consulting company that it accused of preying on vulnerable families as they sought legal residency in the United States, officials said Thursday.

American Legal Services and its owners claimed that consultants at three Oakland offices were attorneys who could help people achieve dreams of citizenship. Instead, families were shattered, with relatives deported and stuck in Mexico as a result of "botched" legal work by a "morally bankrupt enterprise," said Oakland City Attorney [Barbara Parker](#).

Company employees made promises to clients even when they knew certain immigration filings would be rejected, the city said, failed to give them copies of forms they filled out, and quoted varying prices for the same services to different clients.

"They were scam artists," Parker said at a City Hall news conference. "They stole thousands of dollars from these families who were seeking help, sometimes their entire life savings."

In a ruling earlier this month on a city lawsuit, Judge [Kimberly Colwell](#) of Alameda County Superior Court said the company's actions against 18 families were "morally devoid, and seem made with the clear intent to defraud a population of immigrants that are particularly vulnerable and without much legal protection."

Colwell ordered the company to pay \$15.1 million, the biggest amount the city has won in litigation. The judge noted in her ruling that the figure "falls well short of holidays together as a family, the ability to offer guidance to one's children and close familial contact that is the bedrock of family life."

The bulk of the judgment consists of civil penalties that are split evenly between the city and the county. So far, Oakland has collected about \$200,000, all of which has gone to the victims, officials said. Each victim has received restitution for the fees they paid to the company plus an additional \$7,600, Parker said.

Among the victims was [Rafael Casanova](#), 43, of Richmond, whose wife and daughter were allegedly duped into returning to Mexico after company employees told them they could easily secure U.S. residency through the Mexican Consulate.

The company filed the wrong petitions, resulting in Casanova's wife being barred from entering the U.S. for 10 years, Parker said. "So they lost a lot more than money," she said. "They lost their family unit."

Casanova said Thursday, "I finally feel a little more of healing, even though my family, we got broken up."

He said he and his wife have since divorced, but that their daughters still need their mother. "Families are meant to be together," he said. "It was painful."

The owners of the company are Musa Bala Balde, [Irene Penalzoza Balde](#) and An-Nisaa Hamza, who also ran Legal Services, a highly visible storefront near the Fruitvale Avenue off-ramp to Interstate 580, officials said. They never showed up in court to contest the lawsuit, and their current whereabouts are unknown, Parker said.

The city attorney acknowledged that her office may not end up receiving all of the \$15.1 million, but said the ruling served as a warning to other companies.