

Tribes Offer Membership to Immigrants

August 17, 2007

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) -- For prices starting at \$50, two nonfederally recognized Indian tribes are offering membership to thousands of illegal immigrants, claiming they can achieve legal status by joining the groups.

But immigration authorities insist becoming a tribe member gives no protection against being deported. And immigration advocates condemn the practice, saying it defrauds immigrants of money and gives them false hope.

"You can't just decide to become a member of a tribe and all of a sudden legalize your status," said Marilu Cabrera, a spokeswoman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

In Nebraska, some people reported paying up to \$1,200 to join the Kaweah Indian Nation, which became the target of a federal investigation after complaints about the tribe arose in at least five states.

Manuel Urbina, the tribe's high chief, acknowledged his group has sold at least 10,000 tribal memberships to illegal immigrants for about \$50 each.

"We are not going against the law, we're with the law," he said, claiming membership papers can help illegal immigrants avoid being detained by authorities if they are asked for documents.

A Florida man has made similar sales pitches to immigrants on behalf of a North Dakota-based tribe.

The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs denied the Kaweah group recognition in 1985 because it was not a real tribe. A Kaweah tribe did exist once, but is unrelated to the one that applied for recognition.

John Dossett, a lawyer for the Washington-based National Congress of American Indians, called the group "just a total sham" and compared its membership offer to spam e-mail solicitations.

Angel Freytez of the Nebraska Mexican-American Commission said advocates have fielded complaints about the group from immigrants in Kansas, California, Tennessee, Texas and Oklahoma.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokesman Tim Counts confirmed that documents from the tribe offer no protection "from the consequences of being in a country illegally. It won't work."

Many immigrants seeking legal status are not sure what to believe, but some are willing to try joining a tribe. In Kansas, a Guatemalan man and his wife from El Salvador were indicted for allegedly trying to get U.S. passports and Social Security cards by claiming to be members of the Kaweah tribe.

The U.S. attorney in Kansas is investigating fraud allegations against the Wichita-based tribe. But the case could be difficult to prosecute because illegal immigrants are hesitant to come forward out of fear they could be turned over to immigration officials.

A Florida man said he sold about 2,000 memberships to the North Dakota-based Pembina Nation Little Shell tribe through a Web site. Each cost \$150.

Audie Watson, president of the Tamarac, Fla.-based religious nonprofit Universal Service Dedicated to God, said his tribe has a waiting list of prospective members. But he admitted about 500 people have asked for refunds because of "adverse publicity."

The Little Shell tribe asked for federal recognition in North Dakota in the 1970s, but tribal representatives never completed the application process, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In 2006, the Florida attorney general's office heard complaints about the tribe. But a spokeswoman for the attorney general said authorities were unable to find victims or substantiate the allegations.

Watson said no legal authority has told him that selling memberships is illegal. As for those who say it's a scam, he said: "If they want to pass judgment, I can't help that."