

Two attorneys with West Coast immigration law firm indicted for visa fraud

Lawyers allegedly sought fraudulent work visas for aliens, including firm's employees

March 1, 2007

LOS ANGELES - A federal grand jury here late yesterday indicted two attorneys with one of the West Coast's largest immigration law firms on charges of filing fraudulent employment visa applications on behalf of foreign nationals, including some of the law firm's own workers.

The 33-count indictment accuses Daniel E. Korenberg, 57, a partner in the law firm formerly known as Korenberg, Abramowitz & Feldun (KAF), and Steven James Rodriguez, 40, one of the firm's senior associates, of committing visa fraud, making false statements and conspiring to commit visa fraud.

The indictment is the latest action in an investigation involving U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General, and the California Employment Development Department.

Previously, a second partner in the KAF firm, Philip Abramowitz, and one of the firm's supervisory paralegals, Heidi Poepping, were charged in separate criminal informations with participating in the scheme. Both defendants have pleaded guilty to conspiracy and Abramowitz additionally pleaded guilty to visa fraud.

According to the indictment, beginning in 2000 and continuing through at least February 2003, the defendants filed fraudulent employment-based visa petitions on behalf of foreign nationals seeking temporary work authorization or permanent residency in the United States. As alleged in the indictment, at least 14 of the aliens who benefited from the visa fraud scheme were KAF employees.

KAF, which is now known as ASK Law Group, is based in the San Fernando Valley community of Sherman Oaks, and the firm maintains offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and Las Vegas.

The indictment details how the firm hired foreign nationals without work authorization for a variety of support positions, including paralegal jobs. The defendants then allegedly applied for fraudulent work visas for those employees and paid them "off the books" in cash until the visas were approved. To support the visa petitions, the indictment alleges that the defendants created documents making false claims about the aliens' work experience and offers of employment.

Employment-based visas normally are issued when a business in the United States needs a person to fill a specific job and is unable to find a qualified employee in the U.S. labor pool. The business can file a petition to allow a particular alien, who is supposed to be qualified to fill the job, to enter the United States to work for the business.

"The fact that the defendants in this case earned their living practicing immigration law makes the charges particularly disturbing," said Robert Schoch, special agent in charge for the ICE office of investigations in Los Angeles. "The people involved in this scheme clearly knew the law and manipulated it for their own purposes to make a profit. As this case clearly shows, ICE will not hesitate to move aggressively against those who commit immigration benefit fraud, whether the perpetrators are career criminals or white-collar professionals."

In addition to the law firm, the probe targeted two Los Angeles-area employment agencies, Job Seekers International and Employmasters International. The investigations revealed that the role of the employment agencies was to identify employers, both real and fictitious, to attest that the aliens seeking the work visas were being recruited for highly skilled jobs that, in most instances, did not exist. In 2005, the three owners

of those employment agencies and one of their employees pleaded guilty to visa fraud and conspiracy charges. Those four defendants are awaiting sentencing.

In addition to those indicted today, the other defendants charged in the case are:

- Philip Abramowitz, 53, of Agoura Hills, a partner in KAF, who pleaded guilty last year to conspiracy and visa fraud;
- Heidi Poepping, 44, of Moorpark, a paralegal at KAF, who pleaded guilty last month to conspiracy to commit visa fraud;
- Arturo Valencia, 55, of Walnut, the owner of Job Seekers International, who pleaded guilty two years ago to one count of visa fraud and one count of conspiracy;
- Maria Theresa Resurreccion, 39, of Anaheim, an employee of Job Seekers International, who pleaded guilty two years ago to one count of visa fraud and one count of conspiracy;
- Arnel Dizon, 35, of Corona, a co-owner of Employmasters International, who pleaded guilty two years ago to one count of visa fraud and one count of conspiracy;
- Marlyn Rodriguez Dizon (Arnel's wife), 43, of Los Angeles, a co-owner of Employmasters International, who pleaded guilty in May 2005 to one count of visa fraud and one count of conspiracy.

"We have a responsibility to all Americans to keep our doors open to immigrants and visitors, while well-guarded against those who break our laws," said USCIS California Service Center Director Christina Poulos. "I am proud of the work done by California Service Center employees in cooperation with officers of USCIS's Fraud Detection and National Security Unit and the Los Angeles District, who worked together to identify these acts of visa fraud by unscrupulous individuals who have disgraced their profession and our immigration system for personal greed."

Marita Janiga, special agent in charge for the San Francisco Region's Office of Labor Racketeering and Fraud Investigations of the Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Labor, stated: "The foreign labor certification program is intended to ensure that the admission of foreign workers does not adversely impact job opportunities and wages for U.S. workers. These defendants allegedly defrauded this program to enrich themselves and their law firm. We will continue to work actively with ICE and other law enforcement agencies to investigate these cases." Korenberg and Rodriguez have agreed to make their initial appearances in United States District Court in Los Angeles March 29. If convicted of the charges in the indictment, Korenberg faces a maximum statutory penalty of 225 years in federal prison, and Rodriguez would face a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison.

The Dizons, Valencia, and Resurreccion are scheduled to be sentenced by United States District Judge Percy Anderson March 26. Poepping is scheduled to be sentenced June 25. Abramowitz is scheduled to be sentenced April 9.