

Adviser to immigrants accused of misrepresentation

By Justin Jouvenal

When the legion of struggling cleaners, cooks and day laborers needed legal and immigration help in the Washington area, Luis Ramirez appeared to be their high-profile champion.

He dispensed free legal advice on a thrice-weekly radio show on WURA (920 AM) and pushed for [the Dream Act](#) in Spanish-language dailies. A Univision segment featured his work helping two women who said they had been forced to become sex slaves. Over the past year or so, the publicity brought him awards and helped send hundreds of clients to his McLean-based legal services firm.

But lawyers say the carefully honed image hid one of the most sophisticated and lucrative legal shams they have seen in the Washington area aimed at the very people for whom he purported to advocate: [Latino immigrants](#).

Ramirez is facing felony charges for allegedly telling clients that he was a lawyer, even though he is not licensed to practice law in the area. People who sought his help accuse him of taking thousands of dollars in fees for legal work he never performed.

The case highlights a concern in the Washington area, where tens of thousands of [recent immigrants](#), who are often vulnerable because of language and other barriers, rely on a relatively small number of professional services providers that market to them.

Ramirez, a 38-year-old who was born in Puerto Rico, denied any wrongdoing. He said that he never purported to be a lawyer and that he performed the work he promised. He said many clients, unfamiliar with the U.S. legal system, were confused about the difference between a paralegal and a lawyer.

“My contract is very clear: I’m a paralegal,” Ramirez said. “To make a complaint, these people will say I’m an attorney. . . . We did our work. We did what they requested.”

Some cash-strapped clients allege Ramirez failed to fill out visa paperwork or to represent them in bond matters and say they are now facing deportation. Others say they pulled together thousands of dollars to pay him for help in legal cases but got nothing in return.

Ramirez, an Oakton resident, is charged with five felony counts of obtaining money under false pretenses. The charges involve four clients in [Fairfax County](#). Ramirez is scheduled to appear in court June 15.

He also faces a civil suit brought by another client in Fairfax and a handful of Virginia State Bar complaints. And a client filed a claim against him in the D.C. courts last year.

“Ramirez is one of the better marketers out there,” said Manuel Leiva, former president of the Hispanic Bar Association of Virginia and one of the lawyers who brought Ramirez’s case to authorities. “The reason people fell for this is because he had such a slick operation.”

Ramirez and Associates works out of a well-appointed Tysons Corner office.

Ramirez says he held high-ranking staff positions in the Puerto Rican Senate before coming to the mainland in the ’90s. One local Spanish-language paper in 2011 mentioned him as a possible state Senate candidate in [Virginia](#), although local Latino leaders said he is not well known in political circles.

“I am not looking for fame or to run for office, but if that is what the people want, I will make that decision,” he told the paper.

Ramirez’s firm’s [Web site](#) says it offers “legal assistant ship,” paralegal, lobbying, notary public and translation work, but it does not list Ramirez as a lawyer. The site does have the feel of a law firm’s Web site, with images of law books and a gavel.

On the home page, Ramirez stands before an image of a waving American flag and offers a personal message, calling immigrants “those brave ones” with “the hope of freedom.” He concludes with a direct appeal: “Let’s give them a chance.”

That message, Ramirez’s charisma and his nicely furnished offices impressed clients. One was Reyna Ordonez-Viera. Ordonez-Viera, who lives in [the District](#) and works as a janitor, said she turned to Ramirez after her husband was charged in a drug case last year.

Speaking Spanish, she said Ramirez led her to believe that he was a lawyer and assured her “everything would be fine.” She said she paid Ramirez to represent her husband, borrowing the \$2,200 fee from a co-worker.

At the first hearing, Ordonez-Viera said, Ramirez introduced himself as a friend to her husband’s public defender and offered no legal assistance. Ordonez-Viera said that she demanded her money back and that Ramirez gave her a \$600 check, which she said bounced.

Ordonez-Viera filed a complaint in D.C. Superior Court and went back to Ramirez for a refund. When she confronted him on an elevator at his office, then in the District, she said he stopped the elevator and threatened to call police and tell them she was a drug trafficker.

“Nobody should believe him,” said Ordonez-Viera, whose husband is behind bars. Her complaint against Ramirez was dismissed because court papers could not be served to him, according to court records.

Ramirez disputes Ordonez-Viera’s account, saying that he never told her he was a lawyer and that she was a client of a lawyer he previously worked for as a paralegal. He denies threatening her and said her money was eventually refunded.

Leiva and other lawyers said the case highlights a pervasive problem in local immigrant enclaves: unlicensed consultants who provide bogus or shoddy legal and immigration work.

In the Latino community, they often go by the term “notario.” In some Latin American countries, a notario publico is legally trained and can provide representation in some matters. In the United States, scammers sometimes get notary public licenses and offer legal advice to clients, who do not understand what a notary does in this country.

In a lawsuit pending in Fairfax County, Eduardo Guerrero Flores says he gave Ramirez \$4,000 to post bond for a friend who was being detained by immigration authorities in Pennsylvania.

Flores says Ramirez gave him a bond receipt, but Flores thinks it was probably forged because no bond was ever paid for his friend. The suit says the friend is now facing deportation.

In his initial conversation with Ramirez, Flores says Ramirez told him, in Spanish, “I am an immigration attorney,” according to court documents.

Ramirez said Flores did not hire him to pay his friend’s bond but to find where he was in the immigration system, since he had given a false name to authorities. Ramirez said he agreed to refund about \$1,500 of the fee after Flores complained.

Others said Ramirez had done good work for them. Diogenes Bustamante, a plumber from [Alexandria](#), said Ramirez helped his wife’s mother get a visa to visit the United States and assisted family members with the green card process.

“He did a great job for my family,” Bustamante said.

Virginia State Bar officials said that they received 52 complaints about immigration consultants between 2007 and 2012 and that such fraud is their biggest concern in the area of unauthorized practice of law. The bar has launched an [education campaign](#) around the issue.

Most alleged scams go unprosecuted. Victims, who are often illegal immigrants, are reluctant to come forward, and some bar officials said Virginia could be better equipped to tackle the fraud.

Unlike [Maryland](#) and some other states, Virginia does not have a law regulating immigration consultants. Unauthorized practice of law is a misdemeanor in the state. In 2009, the bar pushed to upgrade unauthorized practice of law to a felony, but lawmakers said enforcement would cost too much.

“If we had legislation on the books with teeth, it would entice local law enforcement to take up the cases and give them a specific tool to take on the fraud,” said Christine Poarch, vice chairwoman of the Virginia State Bar Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee.

The alleged scam has left some of Ramirez’s former clients losing their tenuous grip on the American dream.

Jose Lopez, a construction worker who lives in [Manassas](#), was facing deportation when he went to Ramirez for help. He said Ramirez took \$1,500 from him and then failed to fill out the proper paperwork for him to apply for a visa — an accusation Ramirez denies. Lopez expects to be deported to his native [El Salvador](#).

“Sometimes I think it would be better if I stayed in my country,” Lopez said.

Staff writers Allison Klein and Nilda Melissa Diaz contributed to this report.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/adviser-to-immigrants-accused-of-misrepresentation/2012/03/08/gIQAjK2L8R_story.html