

# Lawsuit: Austin business fleeced immigrants

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The Texas attorney general's office has frozen the assets of an Austin-based group that it says broke state laws by promising immigration assistance to clients — sometimes for large sums of money — that it did not deliver, officials said Wednesday.

Travis County state District Judge Scott Jenkins granted the state prosecutors' request for an asset freeze and temporary restraining order against Just for People Inc., as well as its directors and affiliates, officials with the attorney general's office said.

The order comes as part of a lawsuit the attorney general filed this month that said the directors of Just for People and a related business promised immigration counseling services to Spanish-speaking people seeking to gain citizenship. The organization said it could help people obtain legal residence papers, work visas and appointments with immigration authorities.

The business did not deliver on those promises and would respond with threats if their clients complained, a violation of the state's deceptive trade practices laws, the lawsuit said.

Attempts to reach the defendants by phone were unsuccessful. It was not known Wednesday if any had hired an attorney.

"Defendants prey on one of the most vulnerable group of consumers in Texas, individuals in the United States illegally," the lawsuit said. "Instead of helping these consumers, defendants take their money, sometimes a substantial amount of money, provided no assistance, and then threaten the consumers with deportation when they complain."

The suit names Just for People director Elizabeth Gabriella Paneque, who it says goes by the aliases Gabriella Gatjnes and Nilda Odalys Paneque, as well as co-directors Frank Alarcon Marimon and Luz L. Guerrero. The suit also names Ayan Mohamed Ismail, who is co-owner of a related business called Lead God, along with Paneque and Marimon, the lawsuit said.

Attorney general's officials said in the suit that they have identified at least 23 people who paid Just for People. One paid the defendants \$11,000 for immigration assistance and received nothing; another paid them \$6,800 for a visa he did not receive, the lawsuit said. In one case, Just for People received a sum of \$50,000 to bring an extended family into the U.S., the lawsuit said.

In addition, the defendants are forbidden by law from promising immigration services because they are not attorneys or approved by the U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals, the lawsuit said.

The lawsuit said the defendants had a "transient lifestyle," lived off cash made from their organization, and that all of the furniture in their home and business was rented.

Teresa Farfan, a spokeswoman for the attorney general's office, said businesses that target illegal immigrants are common in Texas, and the office investigates many of them.

The American-Statesman last year documented the activities of one such group, Cristo Vive para Inmigrantes (Christ Lives for Immigrants), in Northeast Austin. Former clients allege it engaged in unlicensed immigration consulting.

"There's a lot of fear involved in these cases," Farfan said. "People are afraid of being deported, so they don't bring it to the authorities' attention."

<http://www.statesman.com/news/local/lawsuit-austin-business-fleeced-immigrants-2422383.html>