

Couple face sentencing for immigration fraud

By [Paula McMahon](#), Sun Sentinel

9:24 PM EDT, March 28, 2012

The South Florida couple's company was called "Welcome to America, Inc." but it might more accurately have been called "How badly do you want to stay?"

Federal prosecutors say that Levy Garcia-Crespo and his wife, Anyelina Cid Bonilla, traded on the hopes and dreams of more than 3,000 undocumented immigrants who wanted to become legal residents – or at least get driver's licenses that would make it easier for them to stay here.

Their conspiracy involved gaming both the federal immigration system and the state driver's license bureaucracy, according to testimony on Wednesday, the first day of a two-day sentencing hearing in federal court in West Palm Beach.

The fraud involved Garcia-Crespo, 35, posing as an experienced immigration attorney, using the name of a real lawyer. He was caught on video acting as an attorney in immigration court at the Broward transitional center in Pompano Beach, immigration court in Miami and at federal offices in [Palm Beach County](#), records show.

The two pleaded guilty last year to conspiring to commit immigration fraud and prosecutors are recommending they be imprisoned for five years. The Lake Clarke Shores couple agreed to forfeit \$1.8 million in their plea agreement and could also face deportation.

Bonilla, 36, admitted to participating in the fraud at the couple's offices in West Palm Beach. They were busted during a raid in May after a lengthy undercover investigation by U.S. Immigration Enforcement agents.

Prosecutors said Garcia-Crespo and Bonilla instructed clients to file immigration forms with the government that automatically generated a printed receipt, which the clients then took to driver's license offices around South Florida. Though the receipts clearly state they do not entitle the bearer to any special immigration status, officials still issued legal driver's licenses on the strength of them, federal employees testified.

Some of the forms were applications to get legal status, but others involved falsified police reports that claimed the undocumented people were either crime victims or witnesses who needed to remain in the country to testify against criminals.

One irony of the case is that two witnesses — including a convicted felon — who testified before U.S. District Judge Kenneth Marra on Wednesday freely admitted they have no legal status to remain in the country permanently.

Garcia-Crespo's attorney, Jason Kreiss, implied in court that federal prosecutors and ICE agents will help the witnesses to attain legal status because they are cooperating. But the witnesses testified that no promises have been made to them.

Sotero Canastuj, 36, of Stuart, testified that he entered the country illegally from Guatemala in 1998 and later paid about \$1,700 to Garcia-Crespo for records that got him a driver's license. Canastuj was convicted of aggravated battery on a pregnant woman in 2001, which the defense lawyers said means he is ineligible to become a legal permanent resident.

Abelina Hipolito, 36, of Indiantown, testified that she came to the U.S. illegally in 1997 from Mexico. She works in a restaurant, is married and has two children. She said she and her husband gave Garcia-Crespo "between \$20,000 and \$24,000" to try to get them legal status here and he succeeded in getting them state driver's licenses that were renewed at least twice.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/fl-immigration-fraud-couple-20120328,0,2649149.story>