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News Releases

MARCH 22, 2011 ST. LOUIS, MO

Missouri woman sentenced to 12 months for employing illegal aliens

ST. LOUIS, Mo. - A local woman was sentenced Tuesday to a year in prison for transporting, harboring and hiring illegal aliens to work at the Chinese restaurant she managed. This sentence resulted from a worksite enforcement investigation conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

Hua Huang, aka Christine Huang, 36, of Poplar Bluff, Mo., was sentenced March 22 in the Eastern District of Missouri on two counts each of harboring, transporting, and employing illegal aliens, and one count each of structuring a financial transaction and conspiring to commit visa fraud. She pleaded guilty to the charges in December. Upon release from prison, Huang will also serve two years supervised release with a six-month term of home confinement.

Huang was arrested on Oct. 4, 2010 by ICE HSI agents and officers with the Poplar Bluff Police Department. Huang was ordered held without bond at the time of her arrest, and she remains in federal custody.

The investigation, which was initiated by the Poplar Bluff Police Department, began in February 2009. ICE HSI joined the investigation in October 2009. The investigation revealed that between January 2009 and August 2010, Huang was manager of the China Buffet/Mongolian Grill in Poplar Bluff. During that time she regularly employed a number of illegal aliens from Mexico and China in order to provide a cheap source of labor.

The employees typically worked 12-hour shifts, six days a week, and were paid in cash amounts far less than minimum wage. Waiters and waitresses were typically paid in tips only. State and federal taxes were not withheld. Cash sales for the restaurant routinely went unreported.

As a result of surveillance conducted by ICE HSI agents and Poplar Bluff police officers, authorities determined that the illegal workers were being housed or "boarded" in two residences located at 1016 Velma and 802 Lester in Poplar Bluff. These residences were owned by individuals and entities connected to the China Buffet/Mongolian Grill.

Authorities observed that the workers were shuttled to and from work daily in a van operated by Huang or other employees of the business.

On Aug. 4, 2010, federal search warrants were executed at the following locations: 1016 Velma, 802 Lester, Huang's residence located at 2808 Virginia Ave, and the China Buffet/Mongolian Grill located at 1375 N. Westwood Blvd. During the execution of the search warrants, agents seized a 2008 Highlander sport utility vehicle, a 2005 Chevrolet passenger van, and \$34,000 in cash. The van was being operated by Huang to transport illegal workers to the China Buffet. As part of the prosecution, the vehicles, cash, and four separate pieces of real estate were ordered forfeited, with a total value of more than \$350,000.

During the search at Huang's residence, authorities located a contract between Huang, her father, and her uncle. The contract provided that Huang's uncle would travel to China and marry a Chinese woman for the sole purpose of obtaining U.S. visas for the woman and her two children. According to the contract, Huang and her father would pay her uncle \$140,000 in three installments, the last to be paid when the woman and her two children obtained U.S. visas and green cards. The contract provided

that Huang's uncle would not divorce the Chinese woman until she and her children had secured legal status in the United States. As part of the contract, in exchange for their visas, the Chinese woman and her two children were bound to work for Huang and her father in the United States for three years each. On July 3, 2007, Huang's uncle married the Chinese woman and on Sept. 28, 2007, he applied for a U.S. visa on behalf of the woman and her two children. The petition was denied.

In her guilty plea, Huang also admitted to structuring financial transactions to prevent a financial institution, the Sterling Bank of Poplar Bluff, from reporting those transactions.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Larry H. Ferrell, Eastern District of Missouri, prosecuted the case.

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