

New Effort to Protect Immigrants From Tricks

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

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[Immigration](#) officials are teaming up with federal and state prosecutors, the Federal Trade Commission, lawyers' groups and immigrant advocate organizations in a new nationwide effort to combat an epidemic of schemes by people posing as immigration lawyers.

The campaign, which will begin in Washington on Thursday, is an effort by the Obama administration to step up one form of assistance to immigrant communities, which have intensified their criticism of President Obama as they have faced a record pace of deportations in the last two years.

Officials say this is the first time a crackdown on fake immigration lawyers has been coordinated broadly among federal and state agencies and local immigrant aid organizations. Federal appeals courts in New York, California and other regions with major immigrant populations have been deluged with cases of immigrants who sought legal status through the courts, but ended up in labyrinths leading to deportation because of incompetent or fraudulent lawyers.

The effort involves a blitz of advertising to alert immigrants on how to recognize fake lawyers and consultants, and an effort by prosecutors to bring criminal cases to serve as examples. A program by the immigration court system will expand the number of local nonprofit organizations trained and certified to provide basic legal services to immigrants.

The initiative is led by [Citizenship and Immigration Services](#), the federal agency whose director, Alejandro N. Mayorkas, is a former federal prosecutor in California. In that position, Mr. Mayorkas said in an interview, he had brought a number of cases against people illegally practicing immigration law. He said it was "heartbreaking" to learn, when he came to the agency in Washington, that the problem had not abated.

Since January of last year, the immigration agency has tested the program in pilots in New York, Los Angeles, San Antonio and four other cities.

In New York, Wilmer Rivera Melendez, a Puerto Rican with a criminal record including a conviction for bigamy, coaxed as much \$75,000 each from 14

immigrants from Guyana, claiming he was an immigration lawyer with two decades' experience. Most of the immigrants were in deportation proceedings by the time New York state prosecutors stopped him. Mr. Rivera was sentenced in January to two years in jail.

In another case that convinced officials of the need for wider action, the Federal Trade Commission filed a complaint in January in Nevada against a company called Immigration Forms and Publications, which created a Web site designed to look like the Citizenship and Immigration Services site, complete with an image of the Statue of Liberty. Telemarketers working for the site collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in fees for visa forms and services that immigrants believed were going to the federal agency.

A more common and persistent problem involves notarios, a Spanish word referring to a type of accountant. Although notarios can perform legal functions in many Latin American countries, they have no authority to act as lawyers in the United States. Also, sometimes tax accountants in immigrant communities will offer immigration services they are not qualified to provide.

“Oftentimes, no documents have been filed for the immigrants, or they have been filed wrong and kicked back,” said Reid Trautz, director of the practice and professionalism center of the [American Immigration Lawyers Association](#). “It is a very good thing that a coalition of agencies is coordinating to take this on,” Mr. Trautz said.

He said the lawyers association would hold clinics to assist immigrant victims of fraudulent lawyers, and would provide training in immigration law for legitimate lawyers in other fields.

The trade commission will gather victims' complaints in a central database.

Officials hope the campaign will ease the overload in the federal appeals courts, which hear appeals from immigration courts. Judge Harry Pregerson of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, in California, said that court had seen a surge in immigration cases, with 37,990 cases in the last eight years.

“So many of these people were represented so poorly by incompetent or disbarred lawyers, or they were snared in the clutches of notarios,” Judge

Pregerson said in an interview. “It’s a huge scam that has disrupted the lives of thousands of families.”