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Immigration Scam Shut Down by FTC

At the request of the Federal Trade Commission, a federal judge has shut down an operation that allegedly posed as the U.S. government, then duped consumers into paying fees ranging from \$200 to \$2,500 by claiming the fees would cover processing by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. The court froze the defendants' assets and appointed a receiver to take over the business until the case is resolved. The FTC has asked the court to halt the business practices permanently and order the operation to repay its victims.

The real U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), a division of the Department of Homeland Security, offers advice and counseling to immigrants in the United States and people seeking to immigrate to the United States. USCIS provides application forms for such benefits as green card renewal, work visas, and applications for asylum. The application forms are free but can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars to process.

According to the FTC, defendants Immigration Center and Immigration Forms and Publications, Inc., set up websites that mimic official government sites, and then used the fake sites to steer immigrants to their deceptive telemarketing operation. The websites depicted American eagles, the U.S. flag, and the Statue of Liberty and had URLs such as www.uscis-ins.us and www.usgovernmenthelpline.com. The sites directed consumers to call a toll-free number that an automated voice answered, "Immigration Center." Consumers were then transferred to a live person who answered, "USCIS or "U.S. Immigration Center," and identified him or herself as an "agent," "immigration officer," or "caseworker." The sites also offered counseling and application forms. The counseling was done by telemarketers who did not meet legal requirements to provide immigration services, the FTC said.

Adding to the consumers' confusion, the FTC alleged, the defendants charged fees for application forms that were the same amount as the government processing fees, leading them to believe the fees covered the cost of USCIS processing. Some consumers who applied for the forms were told to send checks by overnight mail to cover the costs. Others paid with checks or money orders on delivery. Consumers ended up paying for applications that were never processed by the USCIS for failure to pay the official processing fee, or, in some cases, they were charged twice, once by the defendants and once by the government after the defendant forwarded their bank account information to USCIS.

The FTC charged the defendants with violating federal law by misrepresenting:

- that they were authorized to provide immigration and naturalization services;
- that they were affiliated with the U.S. government; and
- that the fees paid by consumers would cover all the costs associated with submitting immigration documents to the USCIS.

In addition, two of the defendants were charged with providing the others with the means and instrumentalities to further the illegal scheme.

The correct website of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service is www.uscis.gov.

The defendants named in the case are Immigration Center; Immigration Forms and Publications, Inc; Charles Doucette, individually and doing business as Telestaffing; Immigration Forms and Services and

Immigration Form Processing; Deborah Stilson aka Deborah Malmstrom; Alfred Boyce; Thomas Strawbridge; Robin Meredith; Thomas Lawrence; and Elizabeth Meredith.

The Commission vote authorizing staff to file the complaint was 5-0. The complaint was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Nevada.

The FTC wishes to acknowledge the invaluable assistance in this matter by the Department of Homeland Security; the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; Immigration and Customs Enforcement; Office of the Attorney General of Colorado; Office of the Attorney General of Missouri; Office of the Attorney General of Nevada; the Pettis County, Missouri Sheriff's Office; the Department of Justice and Executive Office for Immigration Review; and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

NOTE: The Commission files a complaint when it has "reason to believe" that the law has been or is being violated, and it appears to the Commission that a proceeding is in the public interest. The complaint is not a finding or ruling that the defendant has actually violated the law. The case will be decided by the court.

The Federal Trade Commission works for consumers to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices and to provide information to help spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint in English or Spanish, visit the FTC's online [Complaint Assistant](#) or call 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357). The FTC enters complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to more than 1,800 civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad. The FTC's Web site provides free information on a variety of [consumer topics](#).

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