

Walletpop

Immigration Scammers Charged Fees for No Services, FTC Says

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Paul J. Richards for AFP/Getty An elaborate scheme that fooled prospective immigrants into paying hundreds of dollars in fees to a phony U.S. government agency has been [shut down](#) by the Federal Trade Commission.

The defendants, the FTC said, posed as the U.S. government to trick consumers into paying fees ranging from \$200 to \$2,500 to cover "processing fees" by what they referred to as the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The real [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#) (USCIS), a division of the Department of Homeland Security, offers advice and counseling to both immigrants and would-be immigrants. 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, even thousands, of dollars to process.

The FTC [accused](#) the defendants, Immigration Center and Immigration Forms and Publications, Inc., of creating counterfeit government websites to steer immigrants to their deceptive telemarketing operation. The websites featured American eagles, the U.S. flag, the Statue of Liberty and used URLs including [www.uscis-ins.us](#) and [www.usgovernmenthelpline.com](#).

The correct website for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service is [www.uscis.gov](#).

The phony sites directed consumers to call a toll-free number answered by an automated voice saying "Immigration Center." Consumers were then transferred to a 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, the FTC said, was done illegally by telemarketers lacking any qualifications or credentials to provide immigration

services.

Adding to the confusion, the defendants charged the same amount in fees for processing application forms as the U.S. government. Some consumers who applied for the forms were instructed to send checks by overnight mail to cover the costs, while others paid by checks or money orders on delivery.

As a result, consumers ended up paying for applications that were never processed by the USCIS for failure to pay the official processing fee. In some instances victims were charged twice, once by the scammers and once by the government after the defendants forwarded their bank account information to USCIS.

The FTC said the phony immigrant assistants violated federal law by misrepresenting:

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

The defendants 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.

A federal judge, at the request of the FTC, has frozen the defendants' assets and placed the business in receivership. The FTC wants to put the operation out of business permanently and force the defendants to refund their victims.

Last July, New York state sued several companies [posing as immigration lawyers](#) and service providers who took advantage of Haitian immigrants desperate to extend their legal status in the U.S. after the January earthquake that killed almost a quarter-million people.