

Notarios: Immigrant Friend or Foe?

The government is warning about potential scams in applying for citizenship and legal status that could cost thousands of dollars.

By [Hernán Rozemberg](#)

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SAN ANTONIO, Texas — The logjam in Washington D.C. over immigration reform has led to an unintended consequence: Fraud.

So called “*notarios*” who sometimes also go by “immigration consultants” are essentially non-lawyer, non-licensed legal advisers that are popular with illegal immigrants seeking some kind of legal status.

These *notarios* can charge several thousand dollars for work visas, green cards or citizenship applications. Sometimes it works. Most of the time, it doesn't.

Either way, the federal government is now backing the long-time clamor by licensed immigration lawyers and immigrant advocacy organizations to put *notarios* out of business.

The San Antonio regional office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services ([USCIS](#)) — the benefits branch of the immigration service within the Department of Homeland Security ([DHS](#)) — has been at the forefront of pursuing immigration scammers.

The new public awareness campaign dubbed: “The Wrong Help Can Hurt: Beware of Immigration Scams” was conceived in San Antonio. The very title of the campaign was a creation of [Catholic Charities of San Antonio](#), one of the community partners leading the program.

Though the effort is now spreading nationally, for years USCIS in San Antonio teamed up with the Texas Attorney General's Office to identify and prosecute swindlers.

“Someone will come to our counter. And they will tell us a horror story of how they had paid thousands of dollars for what they thought was a visa that was being filed for their nephew and of course you can't file a visa for your nephew,” explained Wiley Blakeway, field office director for USCIS in San Antonio.

“And they didn't realize that and then they'd go check on it and they don't get anything,” Blakeway added. “So they would come to us. So this was how these kinds of cases would get started.”

Texas Attorney General [Greg Abbott](#) has built a reputation as a hardliner against immigration scam artists. His spokeswoman, Teresa Farfán, said 65 have been shut down in the last eight years.

Many times they're easy to spot in local strip malls. The signs say "*notario*," or notary. But Farfán says there's a huge difference.

"In the state of Texas, when a notary public advertises as a *notario público* in Spanish, they're breaking the law," Farfán said. "This is because *notario público* has a different connotation in Latin America. A *notario público* is a highly sophisticated attorney. But in Texas, a notary public can only witness the signing of legal documents."

Linda Brandmiller, who directs immigration services at Catholic Charities of San Antonio, has tried to bring attention to this issue for years. She said fraud victims stream into her office nearly every day.

"The first word I think about is victimization," Brandmiller said. "It's a way to prey on the most vulnerable in our communities by enticing them to submit things to the government, often times with dire consequences."

While most immigrants don't know they're being scammed, some are actually aware that *notarios* may be too good to be true. A lawyer may have already told these immigrants that they cannot get legal status. But right around the corner there's a *notario* whose promises seem heavenly.

[Paul Parsons](#), an immigration lawyer in Austin, has been sounding the alarm for 30 years. He says the political impasse over immigration reform in Washington has made the *notario* problem worse than ever.

"People are so desperate for hope that the first person that tells them good news, they are willing to pay happily," Parsons lamented.

Luis Rojas didn't know any better.

He swam across the Rio Grande and moved to San Antonio in 1979. He gained legal residency through an amnesty years later. Then a popular *notaria* helped him successfully apply for citizenship. Rojas went back to her to get a green card for his wife.

This time it didn't go so well.

"She told me she had a direct account with the immigration service, that she had submitted all my paperwork. But it was all a lie," Rojas said.

The *notaria* still owes him more than \$3,000. She keeps telling him she'll pay him back but by now he's given up.

Instead, he decided to try again — through a licensed immigration lawyer.

For their part, many *notarios* feel wrongly targeted. They argue that they fill a community need since they charge a lot less than lawyers; amounts that poor immigrants can actually pay. And many of them are just as knowledgeable of immigration law, they claim.

“I was helping people, I was not hurting people,” said Clara Hernández, owner of [Clara’s Multiservicios](#) in Amarillo, a *notaria* in the Texas Panhandle.

Based on a complaint, the state Attorney General investigated and then sued her for posing as an immigration lawyer.

Hernández said she didn’t know she was breaking the law. She settled by paying a fine of thousands of dollars and agreed to quit providing immigration advice.

But the *notaria* remains defiant, insisting immigrants do not need pricey lawyers for many benefit applications they can apply on their own.

“I tell them: ‘Look, there’s the number. Do you know how to type? Do you know how to get into the Internet? Do you know how to read? If you do it wrong, don’t worry, they send it back and you do whatever needs to be done,’” Hernández said.

She’s technically right. The government offers most immigration forms for free online. But scammers are now also stepping into the 21st century. They’re setting up Web sites that look government sponsored. They fool immigrants into submitting application fees.

It’s a fresh reminder for anti-*notario* forces. There are now 27 cities that model San Antonio’s effort, and more will be added this year. A [website](#) on *notario* scammers set up by USCIS has received more than 75,000 hits since the campaign was launched in June.

<http://www.fronterasdesk.org/news/2012/jan/06/notarios-immigrant-friend-or-foe/>