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Three Missourians Sentenced for Defrauding Consumers Seeking Immigration Services

Three defendants who previously pleaded guilty in connection with an immigration services fraud scheme were sentenced in federal court, the Justice Department announced today. The three defendants formerly worked at Immigration Forms and Publications (IFP), a Sedalia, Mo., company that falsely represented to consumers that IFP was affiliated with the federal government and sales representatives were immigration agents, fees paid to IFP covered government filing fees for immigration documents and that IFP could speed up application processing. All three defendants pleaded guilty to mail and wire fraud charges in August 2012.

U. S. District Judge Brian C. Wimes of the Western District of Missouri sentenced Thomas Laurence, 31, to 130 months in prison; Thomas Strawbridge, 50, to 82 months in prison and Elizabeth Meredith, 25, to a year and a day in prison. In sentencing the defendants, the court found that they caused customers to lose a total of more than \$400,000. In addition to prison time, the court ordered the three defendants to pay a total of \$613,969 in restitution to victims.

"Immigrants who come to this country and try to play by the rules deserve fair treatment under the law – not to be bilked out of their hard-earned savings by those looking for a quick buck," said Stuart F. Delery, Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department's Civil Division. "We are pleased to have worked with our law enforcement partners to bring to justice the leaders of this fraudulent operation."

"This company exploited more than a thousand law-abiding immigrants by selling them government forms that anyone can obtain for free," said U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Missouri Tammy Dickinson. "They preyed on legal immigrants who were doing their best to follow the law, and they are being held accountable for their fraud and deceit."

According to court documents, Strawbridge founded and owned IFP, which operated in 2009 and 2010. The IFP representatives falsely represented to consumers that IFP handled excess call volume for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The company also sold immigration forms, which are generally available at no charge from the government, to immigrants using fraudulent means. The representatives falsely told consumers that the company employed paralegals who would help customers correctly fill out the immigration forms, and that forms purchased through IFP would be processed more quickly than if consumers dealt directly with USCIS.

The IFP representatives also falsely told consumers that fees paid to IFP included government processing fees. However, the IFP employees concealed the fact that the government routinely charged processing fees that IFP customers would be required to pay in addition to IFP charges. They also concealed that a high percentage of IFP customers had complained to the company and requested refunds when they discovered that payments to IFP did not include government processing fees and that IFP sales representatives had no particular expertise in immigration matters.

The case was prosecuted by Trial Attorneys Alan Phelps and Adrienne Fowler of the Justice Department's Consumer Protection Branch, Civil Division and Tony Gonzalez, Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Missouri. It was investigated by the FBI, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Missouri Secretary of State's Corporate Division and Securities Division and the Missouri Attorney General's Office. The Federal Trade Commission also provided important assistance.

For information on avoiding immigration services fraud, go to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website: www.uscis.gov/avoidscams.