

Unauthorized immigration consultant shut down, ordered to pay restitution

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After more than two decades of complaints that Cristo Vive was harming immigrants by providing legal help without a license, a district judge has ordered the nonprofit to dissolve and pay up to \$250,000 in restitution to former clients.

In 2012, the Texas Attorney General's office filed an enforcement action against the firm and its owner, Jorge Sanchez, for unlawfully telling clients they were legally authorized to handle immigration cases before federal authorities.

Under an agreement reached Aug. 30 in Travis County's 53rd Judicial District Court, Cristo Vive was also fined \$300,000 in civil penalties, which becomes payable if they fail to shut down or violate the final judgment, which also prohibits Sanchez from acting as a notary public or using the name Cristo Vive in the future.

The company's headquarters on Manor Road will be used as collateral for Sanchez's payment of restitution and attorney's fees.

In 2011, an American-Statesman investigation found that numerous former clients claimed Sanchez and Cristo Vive bungled their immigration cases, leading to deportation hearings and arrest. The Mexican consul general in Austin, Rosalba Ojeda, argued the very name of the organization helped lure unwitting clients. Immigrants "are accustomed to their church, their faith," she told the Statesman in 2011. The name "is very appealing for immigrants and particularly deceptive."

Cristo Vive provided legal help to a significant number of immigrants since it was created in 1987. Court records show that between 1999 and 2001 alone, Cristo Vive served between 3,400 and 5,400 clients per year, during which time it collected fees ranging from \$232,000 to \$619,000 annually.

Federal and state officials have cracked down on unlicensed or fraudulent immigration consultants in recent years. Since 2002, the Texas Attorney General's office has shut down more than 75 unauthorized immigration consultants around the state.

Officials warn that many take advantage of the confusion between a "notario publico," which in Latin America can refer to an attorney, and a notary public, which in the U.S. refers to someone who is only able to certify certain documents.

The Texas Attorney General targeted Cristo Vive and other immigration consultants for civil violations of the Texas Deceptive Trade Practices Act and the Notary Public Act. But a recently

introduced U.S. House bill calls for up to 15 years in federal prison for providing fraudulent legal services.

Cristo Vive attorney Ed Watt, of Dripping Springs, said Sanchez and two other Cristo Vive employees targeted by the state agreed to the judgment because “they quite frankly got tired of fighting.”

Watt said Cristo Vive provided a needed service for immigrants who couldn’t afford more expensive options, and he blamed the lengthy legal saga on “those who opposed the competition at lower rates.”

He said Sanchez will continue to operate a tax business and real estate venture.

Cristo Vive got its start as one of numerous organizations given government approval to work on the flood of immigration cases ushered in by the so-called amnesty bill of 1986. But local lawyers say that after the program ended in 1989, Cristo Vive continued to provide legal help to immigrants in violation of state and federal law.

In 1995, the Texas Supreme Court’s Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee obtained a permanent injunction against Cristo Vive, barring it from representing itself as qualified or authorized to practice law. The committee continued to pursue Cristo Vive, arguing that it was ignoring the consent decree.

One former Cristo Vive client told the Statesman in 2011 that Sanchez’s bad advice nearly got him deported when the Cristo Vive founder suggested he seek a religious worker visa instead of applying for political asylum because of threats of violence in his native Colombia.

“You feel panic, fear,” the man told the Statesman. “You feel like everything is falling on top of you. It’s as if I came with cancer and he injected me with malaria.”