

News Release

June 9, 2011

National Initiative to Combat Immigration Services Scams

DHS, DOJ and FTC Collaborate with State and Local Partners in Unprecedented Effort

WASHINGTON—The U.S. government unveiled today a multi-agency, nationwide initiative to combat immigration services scams. The Departments of Homeland Security (DHS) and Justice (DOJ) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) are leading this historic effort.

This initiative targets immigration scams involving the unauthorized practice of immigration law (UPIL), which occurs when legal advice and/or representation regarding immigration matters is provided by an individual who is not an attorney or accredited representative.

“We are dedicated to protecting vulnerable immigrants from those who seek to exploit them,” said U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Director Alejandro Mayorkas. “Through our sustained outreach, enforcement and education efforts, and our close collaboration with our federal, state, and local partners, we will provide the communities we serve with the help needed to combat this pernicious problem.”

This initiative is set upon three pillars—**enforcement, education and continued collaboration**—designed to stop UPIL scams and prosecute those who are responsible; educate immigrants about these scams and how to avoid them; and inform immigrants about the legal immigration process and where to find legitimate legal advice and representation.

“This coordinated initiative targets those who prey on immigrant communities by making promises they do not keep and charging for services they are not qualified to provide,” said Tony West, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Division of the Department of Justice. “We are attacking this problem both through aggressive civil and criminal enforcement and by connecting qualified lawyers with victims who are trying to navigate a complicated immigration system.”

The Department of Justice, through United States Attorneys’ Offices and the Civil Division’s Office of Consumer Protection Litigation, is investigating and prosecuting dozens of cases against so-called “notarios.” In the last year, DOJ has worked with investigators at the FBI, ICE, and USCIS, and with state and local partners, to secure convictions—with sentences up to eight years in prison and forfeiture and restitution of over \$1.8 million. This is in addition to the many actions at the state and local levels that have been filed against individuals and businesses engaged in immigration services scams.

ICE has also long been pursuing immigration services fraud cases in part through its 18 Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force offices across the country. In a recent case in West Palm Beach, Fla., ICE Homeland Security Investigations agents arrested an individual on May 26 who had posed as an attorney and processed more than 3,000 fraudulent immigration applications.

“Notarios and other illegal immigration service providers take advantage of unsuspecting immigrants trying to navigate the immigration system,” said ICE Director John Morton. “ICE will continue to work with our federal, state and local partners to combat notario fraud and protect the integrity of the legal immigration system.”

Meanwhile, FTC has made it easier for consumers to alert law enforcement about these scams by creating a new Immigration Services code in the [Consumer Sentinel Network](#), its online consumer complaint database. “This is a central location for consumers to report complaints and for our law enforcement partners to find and share information about scams,” said FTC Commissioner Edith Ramírez.

Sentinel, as the network is called, is a secure online database that holds more than 6 million consumer fraud complaints. Shared with more than 2,000 law enforcement entities including ICE, DOJ and now USCIS, it has become the primary repository for complaints involving allegations of immigration services scams. Sentinel will serve as an investigative tool for USCIS Fraud Detection and National Security officers, and will bolster communication between organizations on immigration services scam-related cases.

The initiative’s education component will focus on empowering immigrant communities to avoid unscrupulous individuals and businesses engaged in UPIL. USCIS’s efforts will be primarily aimed at providing immigrants with the information they need to make informed choices when seeking legal advice and representation on immigration matters, and reminding them that [The Wrong Help Can Hurt](#).

Today, USCIS unveiled a new brochure, a poster, public service announcements for use on radio and in print publications, billboard and transit ads, and a new [Web resource center](#) that includes a video. All printed materials are available in English and Spanish, and materials in 12 additional languages are available online. To bolster this outreach effort, DOJ’s Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) and FTC will produce and distribute educational materials for different populations that may be affected by immigration services scams.

As part of the initiative’s emphasis on providing qualified legal assistance to this vulnerable population, [EOIR’s Recognition and Accreditation](#) program, DOJ, USCIS, and FTC are working together to increase the number of EOIR-recognized organizations and accredited representatives, particularly in underserved areas. Organizations and representatives seeking to provide lawful immigration services must be recognized by EOIR.

“EOIR is hard at work to increase access for our government partners, nonprofit organizations, and individuals in immigration proceedings,” said EOIR Director Juan P. Osuna. “Through a combination of efforts, including reporting fraud, educating the public and dedicated outreach, we are bolstering our efforts toward growing a force of legitimate legal services providers and getting rid of fraudsters.”

EOIR is improving its Recognition and Accreditation Program by increasing communication with the public, providing easier application processing, and giving timely, accurate information to the public regarding which organizations have representatives available to represent individuals in proceedings.

DOJ’s Civil Division and [Access to Justice Initiative](#) are involved in an effort to train more attorneys to handle the cases of immigration fraud victims. As a result of these efforts, DOJ announced that nongovernmental organizations, working with local partners, will organize a pro bono legal clinic in Baltimore later this summer to assist victims of an enforcement action announced by the FTC today. Driven by a continuing dialogue with DOJ, the City Bar of New York, the New York State Bar Association, the New York Office of the Attorney General, the Katzmann Study Group, and nongovernmental organizations, a legal training program will be launched this summer in New York City to expand the pool of lawyers who can assist in immigration matters.

For more information about [USCIS's](#) education initiative, please visit www.uscis.gov/avoidscams or follow us on [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) and the USCIS blog, [The Beacon](#).

A list of federal, state and local immigration services cases and additional information regarding EOIR's [Recognition and Accreditation Program](#) are available on [DOJ's website](#).

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). Like the [FTC](#) on [Facebook](#) and follow them on [Twitter](#).

MEDIA CONTACTS:

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