

Weld DA unveils program to help immigrants prevent, report crime

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By Yesenia Robles

GREELEY — Weld County District Attorney Ken Buck wants immigrants in his county to trust him, he said Tuesday as he announced a new program designed to educate them about their rights.

"We want everyone to report crime every time," Buck said as he introduced the "Preventing and Reporting Crimes Against Immigrants" program.

Buck's office is investigating multiple scams that have targeted members of the immigrant community.

Buck and Heath Montgomery, spokesman for the district attorney's office, said so far they have been unable to file charges in any of those cases.

"Part of the difficulty is we don't have a lot of people coming to us reporting these crimes," Montgomery said. "Some don't know a crime has been committed — for instance, with day laborers. They get picked up and told they'll get \$100, but at the end of the day they only get \$50. That's a crime, but they're not reporting it."

Another common scam targeting immigrants involves immigration paperwork filed with the assistance of people or agencies who call themselves "notarios publicos."

A U.S. notary — the English translation — is not authorized to give legal advice or prepare legal documents, but in some Latin American countries notarios are trained officials with authority to provide legal services.

The scammers take advantage of the fact that some Latinos believe the two to be the same.

Erica Hernandez, who also spoke on Tuesday, is a recent victim of a notario scam.

"When we found out, we kind of cried our eyes out," Hernandez said.

She was told by a notary, Eva Rodriguez, that she could file paperwork to obtain legal residency for her husband. But she was later notified by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that she didn't qualify — at least not with the forms she filed.

By that time, Rodriguez had left the state. She hasn't been charged, although she has been ordered by the Colorado Supreme Court to stop practicing law.

In addition to fees paid directly to ICE, Hernandez lost about \$1,600 paid to Rodriguez. Hernandez didn't report it to the authorities, but investigators have found her and asked her to help with their investigation.

"We figured they would say it was a lost case, what's the point?" Hernandez said.

Buck has sometimes sparked controversy in the handlings of cases involving immigrants, including approving a raid of a tax preparer's office — and then using evidence gathered there to prosecute identity-theft cases.

Weld County also drew national attention in 2006 after an ICE raid on a meatpacking plant resulted in the arrest of 265 workers, mostly Latinos.

Many of the immigrants also carry baggage from bad experiences in their home countries with corrupt governments and law enforcement.

"We come from different countries that the government is not for the people, but use muscle and guns," said Asad Abdi, executive director of Global Refugee Center. "There is no trust unless they can learn from receiving community."

Buck will start selling his new program by speaking to the community at church events and on Spanish public radio.

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