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News Releases

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2 furniture company executives charged in ICE worksite investigation

LOS ANGELES - The president of a Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., furniture manufacturing business was charged Monday with criminal violations stemming from a probe by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Office of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) into allegations the company hired unauthorized alien workers.

Rick M. Vartanian, 57, of Ladera Ranch, Calif., the president and primary shareholder of Brownwood Furniture, is charged in a criminal information with one count of obstruction of justice and one misdemeanor count of continuing to employ unauthorized workers. According to the court documents, in November 2009, Vartanian told ICE that unauthorized workers identified during an earlier HSI audit were no longer employed by the company, when, in fact, the company continued to employ 18 of those workers and had taken steps to shield them from detection by HSI. HSI agents executed a search warrant at the company in December 2009 and discovered the 18 unauthorized employees still working there. Vartanian, who has already agreed to pay a \$10,000 fine, faces a statutory maximum sentence of 66 months in prison.

The enforcement action against Vartanian comes less than three weeks after the filing of charges against Brownwood Furniture's vice president, Michael Patrick Eberly. Eberly, 48, of Alta Loma, Calif., is charged in a criminal information filed Oct. 12 with one count of continuing employment of unauthorized workers, a misdemeanor. Eberly is scheduled to make his initial court appearance Nov. 19. According to the charging document, Eberly knew that many of the furniture company's workers were unauthorized and continued to employ them. Eberly, who has agreed to pay a \$5,000 fine, also faces a maximum sentence up to six months in prison.

"As this case shows, we intend to hold employers who violate our nation's laws accountable," said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge of ICE HSI in Los Angeles. "Targeting employers who knowingly hire unauthorized workers is key to reducing the demand for illegal alien labor and protecting jobs for our country's lawful workforce."

The charges against the defendants stem from an investigation that began after HSI received an anonymous tip that Brownwood furniture was using unauthorized labor. An audit of the company's hiring records in July 2009 revealed that 61 of the firm's 73 employees had submitted invalid documents to obtain their jobs. After HSI notified the company about the discrepancies, the executives told investigators the unauthorized workers had been terminated. However, when HSI agents executed a search warrant at the business in Dec. 2009, they encountered 30 unauthorized workers, 18 of whom had purportedly been terminated following the July audit.

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

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