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JUSTICE NEWS

Assistant Attorney General Tony West Speaks at the “Combating Immigration Services Scams” Press Conference

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Thank you, Ali, for that kind introduction. And I want to thank you and all our partners here today for the hard work and collaboration they have put in to make this initiative a reality. We have been working together to take a stand against those who prey upon immigrant communities by making promises they do not keep and charging for services they are not qualified to provide.

As Ali noted, I am the Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Division of the Department of Justice. Like our partners here, DOJ has committed itself to combating immigration services fraud. In fact, this effort speaks to two of the Department’s core priorities — fighting financial fraud and protecting vulnerable individuals. So, we are working hard not only to stop this fraud today, but to prevent it from happening in the first place.

And these efforts are paying off. The Department of Justice, through our United States Attorneys’ Offices and the Civil Division’s Office of Consumer Protection Litigation, is investigating and prosecuting dozens of cases against these so-called “notarios.” Working with investigators at the FBI, ICE, and USCIS, as well as with our state and local partners, we have secured several convictions in the last year, obtaining sentences of up to 8 years in prison and recovering forfeiture and victim restitution in excess of \$1.8 million.

One of these case involved “Aaron” – to protect his privacy, we’re not using his real name here. Aaron is a U.S. citizen and a member of the U.S. Army in the Los Angeles area, whose father needed an immigration lawyer. He met a man who gave him an official-looking business card and a contract, and took a \$500 fee. Aaron had no way of knowing that this man was not a lawyer at all. Instead, this man stole the identity of a licensed attorney in California and only pretended to help his “clients” in their immigration proceedings.

When the day came for Aaron’s father to appear in court, the so-called lawyer was nowhere to be found. It was only after his father lost his case that Aaron learned the truth about the man who promised to help.

Now, many victims of “notario” fraud are too ashamed to come forward. They suffer in silence. But Aaron summoned the courage to tell his story to federal prosecutors in Los Angeles. And armed with that information and evidence they developed, the U.S. Attorney’s Office there secured a five-year prison sentence against the “notario” who took advantage of Aaron’s father and others in need.

Still, we know we cannot prosecute our way out of this problem. So, in at least three ways, we are being proactive about getting victims the help they deserve.

First, we are encouraging victims to come forward and report what’s happened to their state attorney general, as well as at www.ftc.gov/complaint.

Second, we are involved in an effort to train attorneys in immigration law and thereby expand the pool of attorneys available to represent victims of “notario” fraud in immigration proceedings. As a result of a dialogue with the Department of Justice, a group of organizations, including the American Immigration Lawyers Association (also called “AILA”), the New York City and State Bar Associations, and the Katzmann Study Group, is organizing one such training program in New York City, which is expected to launch later this summer.

And finally, the Civil Division, together with the Department’s Access to Justice Initiative — the new head of that initiative, Mark Childress, is here with us today — and AILA, is working with the seven pilot cities to establish a network of clinics designed to help victims of “notario” fraud. In fact, the first of those clinics will take place in Baltimore later this summer. To bring this effort full circle, that clinic will assist victims in a Baltimore case that the FTC is announcing here today.

While we are proud of what we have accomplished, we know that we are just beginning to tackle this problem. Together, we hope to build on these early successes in the fight against immigration services scams — scams that not only rob victims of their money and their faith in the immigration process, but also undermine the integrity of the judicial system.

Now, it’s my pleasure to introduce John Morton, Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.