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News Releases

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Washington state couple sentenced for alien harboring and illegal employment

WASHINGTON — A husband and wife from northern Washington state have been sentenced to prison after pleading guilty to federal charges stemming from a probe by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations that revealed the pair had hired and harbored an illegal alien domestic worker.

Cherry Valera, 44, and Bernard Salvatierra, 46, of Bellingham, Wash., were sentenced Monday by U.S. District Judge James L. Robart in connection with their May 10 guilty pleas. Valera previously pleaded guilty to harboring an alien for financial gain and Salvatierra pleaded guilty to unlawful employment of an alien. Valera was sentenced to four months in prison and 100 hours of community service during two years of supervised release. Salvatierra was sentenced to six months of home detention with electronic monitoring. The couple paid the victim \$57,000 in restitution at the time of their guilty pleas. They are barred from having any contact with the victim or her family.

According to court filings, Valera recruited an impoverished young woman from the Philippines to be her family's live-in domestic servant. Valera and Salvatierra employed the victim from August 2006 through September 2009, when she escaped. During her employment, the victim was required to work seven days a week, providing full-time childcare, cleaning, cooking and other domestic services. The victim endured verbal abuse and threats during her stay with the defendants. She was paid \$200 to \$240 per month.

"The defendants took advantage of a vulnerable young woman for their personal financial gain," said Thomas E. Perez, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division. "The Justice Department will continue to vigorously prosecute those who engage in such conduct."

"These defendants lured this victim with the promise to treat her like family, then exploited and controlled her, said U.S. Attorney Jenny A. Durkan. "Such conduct cannot be tolerated."

This case was prosecuted jointly by Assistant U.S. Attorney Ye-Ting Woo and Trial Attorney Daniel Weiss of the Civil Rights Division's Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit.

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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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