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News Releases



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3 Jacksonville brothers guilty of marriage fraud

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — A federal jury found three Jacksonville brothers guilty of marriage fraud charges Thursday. The guilty verdicts resulted from an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, the Federal Air Marshal Service, the FBI and the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office.

Mowafak "Mike" Shahla, 43, Antoun "Tony" Chahla, 42, and Fadi Chahla, 40, were found guilty of participating in a conspiracy to enter into marriages for the purpose of evading U.S. immigration laws, making false statements to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and unlawfully attempting to procure naturalization and citizenship.

According to testimony and evidence presented at trial, the brothers are Syrian citizens who recruited three U.S. citizens – two sisters and their sister-in-law – to enter into fraudulent marriages. The men entered into the marriages to become legal permanent residents, and then, citizens of the United States.

Shahla, Antoun Chahla and Fadi Chahla entered into the fraudulent marriages in 1999, 2002 and 2005, respectively. They made cash payments to the women for participating in the fraudulent marriages. Some of those payments were made on a monthly basis. During part of the conspiracy, payments totaling \$3,000 were made to one of the women in exchange for her traveling to Syria on two occasions. The first trip to Syria was to become engaged to Fadi Chahla, and the second trip was to enter into a fraudulent marriage with him.

Shahla, Antoun Chahla and Fadi Chahla each made false statements in their applications for legal immigration status and citizenship. They also lied to immigration officers when they were interviewed about their fraudulent marriages. Prior to the interviews with the immigration officer, the couples met to discuss the details of their purported marriages and rehearse the stories they would tell the immigration officer.

As a result of their fraudulent actions, Shahla, Antoun Chahla and Fadi Chahla became legal permanent residents of the United States, but the conspiracy was discovered by law enforcement authorities before their citizenship applications were processed. They are now subject to deportation based on their convictions.

The three women involved in the fraudulent marriages previously pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit marriage fraud. They agreed to cooperate with the investigation and were each sentenced to two years of probation.

Each brother faces a maximum penalty of five years in federal prison for the conspiracy charge and up to 10 years in federal prison for each of the other offenses. The sentencing hearings have not been scheduled.

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