

Notary public scams prey on immigrants

A language barrier has caused numerous Hispanic immigrants to be duped by notary publics misrepresenting themselves as lawyers.

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When Salvadoran immigrant Irma Yolanda Membreno-Alemán wanted to apply for temporary asylum, she did what she would have done for any legal matter back home: She went to see a *notario publico*.

It was a lost-in-translation mistake that cost her thousands of dollars, a rejection of her petition and loss of her work authorization and her job, a lawsuit claims.

In much of Latin America, most notary publics are also lawyers. In the United States, a notary public is not a lawyer and cannot give legal advice; he can administer oaths and witness signatures, and that's it.

The difference has allowed scam artists to prey on immigrants with limited English skills and little understanding of the American legal system by misrepresenting themselves as lawyers, immigration lawyers say.

It is a growing problem. But prosecutors rarely bring cases against these scam artists, in part, because the victims are often in this country illegally and are afraid to come forward.

Charles Kuck, vice president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, said there have been tens of thousands of cases in which notaries passed themselves off as lawyers.

The problem affects more than just the immigrants who are scammed. Fraudulent and incorrect documents filed by notaries add up to "an unbelievable waste of taxpayer money," Kuck said.

"It makes it harder for judges to wade through the real asylum cases when you've got to wade through so much garbage," Kuck said. "Instead of 200 applications, they have 2,000."

Ceja Enterprises Inc. in Nashville advertises itself in Spanish as an office that provides legal aid, including help with immigration papers. But Carmen Ceja is only a notary public, and her business card refers to her as a *notaria publica*.

Nashville lawyer Sean Lewis, who is suing Ceja on behalf of Membreno-Alemán, said many notaries advertise services they are unqualified to perform, such as tax preparation and divorce.

Membreno-Alemán has since gotten her case reopened, and is living in the United States under temporary protective status granted in cases of civil war and natural disasters back home.

Rudi González, a Mexican living in Nashville who also is part of the lawsuit against Ceja, went to her office for help preparing a contract for a \$3,000 loan he wanted to make.

"I saw her signs and newspaper advertisements, and friends said to go to her because she could draw up a letter for me, like a lawyer, and take responsibility if I didn't get paid back," González said.

Instead, what he got was a poorly worded letter in English that didn't mention interest on the loan, he said. When the borrower defaulted, González ended up paying more than \$5,000 to Ceja and her associates to try to get his money back, the lawsuit claims. But he has not seen a penny from the borrower.

Ceja's attorney, Geoffrey Coston, said the people who messed up González's claim are not associated with Ceja and she cannot be held responsible for their actions.

Ceja's office offers "just an interpretation service," Coston said. The office employees simply fill out forms based on what clients tell them and offer no advice, he said.

He said the sign outside her office advertising legal aid was "a bad sign" that needed to change. But he said he did not believe her business card was confusing to most people.

"Most people go to her knowing she's not an attorney," he said. ``They go because they can't afford an attorney."