

## EAST TEXAS WOMAN CHARGED WITH FRAUD FOR SCAM INVOLVING IMMIGRANTS

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An East Texas woman who once ran an "immigration services" office in Tyler is now in the custody of federal authorities, charged with fraud and facing a state lawsuit that suggests she bilked thousands of dollars from unsuspecting immigrants across Northeast Texas.

The arrest of Maria Elena Garza, 53, of Kemp comes as the result of a statewide effort to quantify and curb immigration fraud, which has mushroomed in East Texas with surging immigrant populations.

The problem has gone largely uncounted because many immigrants refuse to report fraud in the face of language barriers and fears of deportation.

Early this year, state Attorney General Greg Abbott announced the statewide crackdown, focusing efforts in El Paso, San Antonio and Dallas. Ms. Garza's arrest is the campaign's first major action directly affecting Tyler and East Texas.

Local and federal authorities arrested Ms. Garza after she consented to a search of her Seven Points home Sept. 30, according to the state's lawsuit. It states officers found "numerous documents" that were either forged or altered versions of federal paperwork from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, now the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Ms. Garza was never affiliated with any government agency, state officials said.

The lawsuit alleges Ms. Garza accepted \$12,400 from 50 people in a one-month period in 2002.

Abbott spokesman Paco Felici said that represents only a small percentage of what Ms. Garza accomplished over a two-year period.

Tyler immigration attorney Donald Patterson said he believes Ms. Garza ran operations out of her office on South Vine Avenue from May to August 2002, and perhaps longer.

Felici said she assessed processing fees and collected fines, sometimes more than \$1,000 per client, while never forwarding any documents to immigration authorities.

Ms. Garza had no business registered with Smith County, but was widely known among immigration lawyers in Tyler and in the area around Vine Avenue. The state's lawsuit lists her doing business as "Agencia Hispana de Tyler," also under the name Maria Elizondo.

"She left without telling me," said Blas Murillo, who owns the small building Ms. Garza occupied at 1421 S. Vine Ave. "She owed me rent and all that ... left her stuff in there. She just never came back."

Patterson produced copies of paperwork he said came from some of Ms. Garza's former clients.

The documents are consistent with exhibits in the state's lawsuit. They show Ms. Garza instructing a client who paid \$1,200 for apparently bogus immigration paperwork to write any questions to Ms. Garza at "2435 S. Vine" in "Taylor, Texas 75162."

The ZIP code doesn't exist in post office databases, nor does the Vine Avenue address in Tyler. Taylor, in Central Texas, has a different ZIP code.

The documents also listed an "INS" telephone number that actually belongs to an automobile manufacturer.

Officials said after leaving Tyler, Ms. Garza solicited clients through a concession stand she operated at a bingo hall in Seven Points, claiming she worked for a federal immigration office in nearby Corsicana. No such office exists.

Abbott announced Friday he has frozen Ms. Garza's bank accounts and won a temporary injunction preventing her from practicing any kind of immigration services. She remains in the Mansfield Law Enforcement Center, a federal facility southwest of Dallas.

Felici said it's unclear how much damage Ms. Garza might have done, mostly because victims are hesitant to report fraud.

In addition to immigration fraud, Ms. Garza is accused of providing false "international" driver's licenses, work permits and other phony services.

Consequently, the attorney general is asking people to come forward.

"As far as our office is concerned, we do not ask any consumer what their immigration status is, what their country of origin is," Felici said. "We're strictly focusing on violations of the Deceptive Trade Practices Act."

He said it's too early to tell whether or how victims might get restitution because authorities have not fully quantified the scope of Ms. Garza's activities. Ms. Garza has not retained an attorney to handle the lawsuit, Felici said.

Authorities began investigating Ms. Garza after receiving complaints in February, when the attorney general launched the campaign against fraud, Felici said.

People who believe they were defrauded by Ms. Garza can file a report through the attorney general's bilingual hotline at (800) 252-8011.

Aside from outright fraud, many Texas immigrants suffer deportation or financial loss at the hands of immigration service providers who operate without a proper understanding of complex immigration laws.

Before paying someone to process immigration documents, consumers can call the Texas State Bar at (800) 932-1900 to verify the person is a licensed attorney.

Some nonprofit organizations are also authorized to handle immigration matters. They can be verified through the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services.

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