

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **Mexican Nationals Charged with Offenses Stemming from Smuggling and Labor Trafficking Scheme**

Thursday, March 2, 2023

**For Immediate Release**

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Connecticut

Vanessa Roberts Avery, United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, Robert Fuller, Special Agent in Charge of the New Haven Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Hartford Police Chief Jason Thody today announced that MARIA DEL CARMEN SANCHEZ POTRERO, also known as Maria Carmela Sanchez, 69, and APOLINAR FRANCISCO PAREDES ESPINOZA, also known as "Pancho," 56, both of citizens of Mexico residing in Hartford, were arrested yesterday on federal criminal complaints charging each with offenses stemming from their smuggling of aliens into the U.S., harboring them at their Hartford residence, forcing them to work, and threatening to harm them in various ways if they failed to pay exorbitant fees, interest and other living expenses.

Sanchez and Paredes appeared yesterday before U.S. Magistrate Judge Robert A. Richardson in Hartford who ordered them detained. A bond hearing for Sanchez is scheduled for March 8.

As alleged in court documents and statements made in court, beginning in September 2022, the FBI and Hartford Police interviewed approximately 10 Mexican nationals who disclosed that they were smuggled from Mexico into the U.S. and transported to Hartford. The victims typically stated that they had arranged with Sanchez and her associates in Mexico to cross the border into the U.S. in exchange for a fee of between \$15,000 and \$20,000 that each would need to pay once they were in the U.S. In most cases, the victims were required to turn over a property deed as collateral before leaving Mexico. They were then smuggled across the border and transported to Sanchez's and Paredes' residence on Madison Street in Hartford.

It is also alleged that after the victims arrived in Hartford, Sanchez informed them that they would have to pay \$30,000, with interest, and that they would have to pay her for

rent, food, gas and utilities. Sanchez and Paredes created false documents for the victims, including Permanent Residence cards and Social Security cards, and helped the victims find employment in the Hartford area. In addition to their own jobs, some victims were required to perform work around the house, or to assist Paredes in his job responsibilities without compensation and without having their debt reduced.

It is further alleged that Sanchez rarely provided victims with an accounting of their debt. If victims failed to make regular payments, or in amounts that she expected, Sanchez and Paredes would threaten the victims, including threatening to harm family members in Mexico, to take property in Mexico that had been secured as collateral, to reveal victims' immigration status to U.S. authorities, and to raise their interest payments. In one instance, Sanchez threatened to call police to say that a victim had tried to rape her.

Sanchez and Paredes are charged with conspiracy to smuggle, transport, harbor, and encourage or induce aliens to enter and reside in the U.S., an offense that carries a maximum term of imprisonment of 10 years; conspiracy to commit labor trafficking, an offense that carries a maximum term of imprisonment of 20 years; and extortion, an offense that carries a maximum term of imprisonment of 20 years.

U.S. Attorney Avery stressed that a criminal complaint is not evidence of guilt. Charges are only allegations, and a defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

This investigation is being conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Hartford Police Department, U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Angel Krull and Shan Patel.

*Updated March 2, 2023*

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