

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Rancho Cucamonga Businessman Sentenced to One Year in Prison for Exploiting Immigrant Farmworkers by Charging Illegal Visa Fees

SANTA ANA, California – The owner of a Rancho Cucamonga-based farm labor recruiting company was sentenced today to 12 months in federal prison for his role in an immigration fraud scheme that illegally charged Mexican nationals thousands of dollars to obtain H-2A work visas and additional money for expenses once they arrived in the United States.

Jorge Vasquez, 60, of Fontana, the owner of H-2A Placement Services, was sentenced by United States District Judge Josephine L. Staton, who also ordered Vasquez to pay \$135,389 in restitution. Vasquez pleaded guilty in June 2019 to one count of conspiracy and one count of aiding and abetting fraud in foreign labor contracting.

Vasquez and co-defendant Melquiades Jacinto Lara, 64, of Santa Paula, the owner of J&D Harvesting, which contracted workers to farms in Ventura County, conspired to commit mail fraud, false swearing in immigration matters, and fraud in foreign labor contracting.

The H-2A visa program allows employers to hire foreign, short-term agricultural workers when the employer cannot find suitable workers in the United States. H-2A labor contractors provide foreign workers to farms and generally are responsible for recruiting, transporting and housing the foreign workers. Before the foreign workers can receive visas, several government agencies must certify the need for foreign workers and determine that foreign workers would not adversely impact workers already in the United States.

In addition to provisions designed to protect domestic workers, the H-2A program has rules designed to protect foreign workers from exploitation, including prohibitions from charging the foreign workers for government approvals, equipment needed to perform their jobs, transportation to and from the fields, and costs associated with housing.

As part of the scheme, Vasquez travelled to Mexico to recruit farmworkers, who were charged as much as \$3,000 to obtain their H-2A visas.

In addition to illegally charging the foreign workers, Vasquez also made false promises to the workers about how long the visas would be valid and failed to tell the workers that they would be charged for housing, food and transportation.

Vasquez also promised an H-2A visa, in exchange for \$3,500 to \$4,000, to an undercover agent with the Labor Department's Office of Inspector General, who Vasquez believed was an undocumented individual working in the construction industry in Las Vegas and had no interest in working in the agricultural industry.

Vasquez also illegally agreed to provide visas to individuals already present in the United States in exchange for a fee of up to \$4,000.

In relation to the costs being borne by the foreign workers, Vasquez and Jacinto allegedly filed documents with federal authorities that contained false statements in connection with their application for visas for 75 workers to harvest lemons, avocados and oranges. Investigators have reviewed USCIS records that indicate that Vasquez and Jacinto have filed petitions for more than 350 farmworkers from 2012 until May 2018.

Jacinto pleaded guilty to two felonies – conspiracy and fraud in foreign labor contracting – and served a six-month federal prison sentence.

Co-defendant Ricardo Mendoza Oseguera, 41, of Santa Paula, the owner of Discoteca Mi Pueblito, a music and convenience store in Santa Paula, which redeemed vouchers given to workers for J&D Harvesting after deducting fees from the workers' pay, pleaded guilty to one count of operating an unlicensed money transmitting business. He is scheduled to be sentenced on November 20.

This matter was investigated by the United States Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General, Homeland Security Investigations, and the Diplomatic Security Service.

This case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Damaris Diaz of the Violent and Organized Crime Section and Jonathan S. Galatzan of the Asset Forfeiture Section.