

PRESS RELEASE

Mexican National Sentenced to More Than 4 Years in Federal Prison for Smuggling and Labor Trafficking Scheme

Friday, April 11, 2025

For Immediate Release

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

Marc H. Silverman, Acting United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, announced that MARIA DEL CARMEN SANCHEZ POTRERO, also known as Maria Carmela Sanchez, 71, a citizen of Mexico last residing in Hartford, was sentenced today by U.S. District Judge Kari A. Dooley in Bridgeport to 51 months of imprisonment for her involvement in a scheme to smuggle aliens into the U.S., harbor them at Hartford area residences, force them to work, and threaten to harm them in various ways if they failed to pay exorbitant fees, interest, and other living expenses.

According to court documents and statements made in court, beginning in September 2022, the FBI and Hartford Police interviewed several Mexican nationals who disclosed that they were smuggled from Mexico into the U.S. and transported to Hartford. The investigation revealed that victims typically arranged with Sanchez and others in Connecticut and 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 Hartford area residences, including Sanchez's residence on Madison Street in Hartford, often at a substantial risk of bodily injury or death.

After the victims arrived in Connecticut, they were told that they would have to pay approximately \$30,000, with interest, and that they would have to pay Sanchez and her co-conspirators for rent, food, gas and utilities. Sanchez and her co-conspirators 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 housework and yardwork without compensation and without having their debt reduced.

Victims were rarely provided with an accounting of their debt. If victims failed to make regular payments, or in amounts that Sanchez and her co-conspirators expected, they were sometimes threatened, including with threats 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.

To date, investigators have identified 19 victims of this scheme. Multiple victims were minors, and at least two were smuggled into the U.S. unaccompanied by a relative or legal guardian.

Sanchez has been detained since her arrest on March 1, 2023. On October 24, 2024, she pleaded guilty to conspiracy to encourage and induce, bring in, transport, and harbor aliens.

Judge Dooley ordered Sanchez to pay restitution of \$574,608.

Sanchez faces immigration when she completes her prison term.

This investigation has been conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Hartford Police Department, U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 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.

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