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### **TEN DEFENDANTS INDICTED IN SHAM MARRIAGE CONSPIRACY TO ENABLE FOREIGN NATIONALS TO ILLEGALLY OBTAIN U.S. CITIZENSHIP**

CHICAGO – Ten defendants who allegedly participated in a marriage fraud conspiracy to evade immigration laws and enable foreign nationals to illegally become U.S. citizens have been charged in a federal indictment. A 14-count indictment returned by a federal grand jury last week was unsealed today after five of the defendants were arrested this morning by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, announced Patrick J. Fitzgerald, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, and Gary J. Hartwig, Special Agent-in-Charge of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Office of Investigations in Chicago. The defendants include a north side immigration attorney and five current or former Cook County Traffic Court employees, although the charges do not allege that their employment played any role in the alleged fraud scheme.

The indictment alleges that **Maria F. Cruz** and others recruited U.S. citizens and foreign nationals, primarily Filipinos, who entered into at least 15 sham marriages to evade immigration laws, and that the foreign nationals paid Cruz approximately \$3,000 to arrange for them to marry U.S. citizens. Cruz allegedly promised U.S. citizens that in return for marrying a foreign national,

the foreign national would pay the U.S. citizen approximately \$3,000 after the marriage and approximately \$300 to \$350 every month until the foreign national obtained U.S. citizenship.

Foreign nationals who marry U.S. citizens legitimately may become legal permanent residents of the United States but not if the marriage was a sham solely to evade immigration laws.

Cruz, 49, formerly of Chicago and currently living in American Canyon, Calif., was arrested on an initial complaint in this case in late August and was released on a \$200,000 secured bond. She was a Cook County Traffic Court employee until this past summer when she moved to California.

In addition to the 15 allegedly fraudulent marriages detailed in the indictment, Cruz allegedly attempted to arrange two additional marriages between individuals and ICE agents during an undercover portion of the investigation.

Among the five defendants arrested today were **Manny Aguja**, 53, of Chicago, an immigration attorney with an office at 3144 West Montrose Ave., and two employees — his twin brother, **Marc Aguja**, also 53, of Chicago, and **Celeste Ligutan-Lopez**, 36, of Chicago. Cruz allegedly referred participants in fraudulent marriages to Manny Aguja's law office for preparation of paperwork in support of the sham unions. In addition to preparing allegedly fraudulent immigration papers, the Aguja brothers and Ligutan-Lopez met with sham marriage participants and told them what actions they needed to take to make their marriages appear legitimate, according to the indictment, which also seeks forfeiture of the premises housing Manny Aguja's law office.

Also arrested today were **Keisha McGary**, 33, of Chicago, and **Eugene Wilson**, 30, of Chicago, both county employees. The Aguja brothers, Ligutan-Lopez, McGary and Wilson were scheduled to appear at 1:30 p.m. today before U.S. District Judge Samuel Der-Yeghiayan.

Cruz and the remaining four defendants will be ordered to appear for arraignment at a later date. They are: **Maria Cyd Adriatico-Fernandez**, 53, of Oakbrook; and three other Traffic Court employees, **Sonia Maki**, 43, of Chicago; **DeShawn Barksdale**, 39, of Chicago; and Eugene Wilson's sister, **Latrice Wilson**, 37, of Chicago.

Each defendant was charged with conspiracy to commit marriage fraud. Some defendants were charged with additional counts of marriage or immigration fraud, including Cruz who faces 10 counts of marriage fraud. The Aguja brothers were also charged with conspiracy to induce foreign nationals to reside illegally in the United States.

“ICE will not tolerate those who engage in sham marriages to circumvent and exploit our nation's immigration system,” said ICE Assistant Secretary John Morton. “Marriage fraud poses a significant vulnerability that must not go unchallenged. ICE aggressively investigates those who take illegal shortcuts to citizenship, whether they do so to gain an immigration benefit or simply for personal profit.”

ICE was assisted in the investigation by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service's Fraud Detection and National Security (FDNS) program.

According to the indictment, between July 2003 and October 2009 Cruz allegedly paid a fee to others for referring to her U.S. citizens who were willing to enter into fraudulent marriages. Cruz then would drive individuals to weddings and take photos before and after, knowing that they would be used to make it appear that the sham marriages were legitimate, and she also would advise them of steps they needed to take to make their marriages appear legitimate.

The government is being represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason Yonan.

Conspiracy to commit marriage fraud and marriage fraud carry a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Other immigration fraud counts in the indictment carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. If convicted, however, the Court would impose a sentence it deems reasonable under the advisory United States Sentencing Guidelines.

The public is reminded that an indictment contains only charges and is not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed innocent and are entitled to a fair trial at which the government has the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

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