

Beat: News

Couple Sentenced for Subjecting Mother and Two Daughters to Force Labor

Victims of Human Trafficking

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USPA NEWS - Nery A. Martinez Vasquez, 54, and Maura N. Martinez, 54, both of Shasta Lake, California, were both sentenced May 2nd for conspiring to subject three victims to forced labor, a crime to which the defendants had previously pleaded guilty. Vasquez was sentenced to six and a half years in prison and Martinez was sentenced to three years in prison. Both defendants were also sentenced to three years of supervised release and a fine of \$25,000. The couple was also required to pay \$300,000 in restitution to seven total victims. Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke and U.S. Attorney Phillip A. Talbert made the announcement.

According to court documents, from September 2016 to February 2018, the defendants — who owned and operated a restaurant and janitorial service — used various coercive means to force their victims into working long hours of physically demanding work, seven days a week, for minimal to no pay. In August 2016, the defendants convinced the victims, a Guatemalan relative and her two minor daughters, ages 15 and 8, to come to the United States by falsely promising the victims a better life and arranging for them to enter the United States and overstay their temporary visitor visas. The defendants then conspired with each other to impose an inflated debt on the victims that they required the victims to pay back through working for them. When the adult victim complained and expressed an interest in leaving, the defendants threatened to have the victims arrested for overstaying their visas unless they continued working the same long hours, seven days a week, for little pay.

Similarly, the defendants kept the two minor victims working at their businesses instead of attending school by telling the victims that immigration authorities would find and arrest them if the minor victims attempted to go to school. The defendants housed the victims in a dilapidated, unheated trailer with no running water, and degraded and humiliated them in front of others. Finally, the defendants used force and threats of force to intimidate the victims. For instance, Nery Martinez Vasquez beat the children with a stick that had the children's name and nickname written on it along with the phrase "what goes up, must come down."

"These defendants used the promise of a better life to lure a mother and her children to travel to the United States, only to betray their familial relationship and exploit the victims' precarious situation to cruelly oppress and degrade them, and to turn a profit off their backs," said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. "Forced labor has no place in our civilized society. This sentencing makes clear our commitment to holding perpetrators accountable and our dedication to eradicating human trafficking."

"These defendants exploited vulnerable victims, forcing them to work in their businesses, failing to pay wages, and depriving them of basic human rights," said U.S. Attorney Phillip A. Talbert for the Eastern District of California. "Now they have been sentenced to years in prison and have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in restitution to their victims. The U.S. Attorney's Office continues its commitment to protect and defend vulnerable members of our society from human trafficking, and we appreciate the partnerships we have with the Civil Rights Division and the FBI that led to the result in this case."

"We hope today's sentencing will offer the victims confidence as they continue to reclaim their lives. Forced labor, a form of human trafficking, is of significant concern for the FBI, but is difficult to identify and investigate without cooperation of fearful victims who believe escape is not an option because of the lies they have been told by their exploiters," said Special Agent in Charge Sean Ragan for the FBI Sacramento Field Division. "This case highlights how such crimes may occur in public view at a legitimate business yet go unnoticed. The FBI is deeply committed to seeking justice for all victims of human trafficking — regardless of immigration status or background — to ensure victims receive the care and support they need to break free from their exploiters."

This case is the product of an investigation by the FBI. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Katherine T. Lydon and Audrey Hemesath, and Trial Attorney Avner Shapiro of the Civil Rights Division prosecuted the case.

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