

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **Mexican National Admits Role in Smuggling and Labor Trafficking Scheme, Illegally Reentering U.S.**

Friday, November 22, 2024

**For Immediate Release**

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

Vanessa Roberts Avery, United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, announced that APOLINAR FRANCISCO PAREDES ESPINOZA, also known as "Pancho," 58, a citizen of Mexico last residing in Hartford, pleaded guilty today before U.S. District Judge Kari A. Dooley in Bridgeport to charges stemming from his 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 Maria Del Carmen Sanchez Potrero, her co-conspirators in Connecticut, and 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 Hartford area residences, including Sanchez's and Paredes' 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 \$30,000, with interest, and that they would have to pay Sanchez and her co-conspirators for rent, food, gas and utilities. Sanchez, Paredes, and their 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, or to assist Paredes in his job responsibilities, 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, Paredes, and their 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 18 victims of this scheme.

In November 2014, Paredes was encountered in the U.S. and removed the same day via foot at Hildago, Texas. He illegally reentered the U.S. and, in December 2018, was arrested by East Hartford Police and charged with various motor vehicle offenses. He was again removed to Mexico in February 2019.

Paredes has been detained since his arrest on March 1, 2023.

Paredes pleaded guilty to conspiracy to encourage and induce, bring in, transport, and harbor aliens, an offense that carries a maximum term of imprisonment of 10 years, and to illegal reentry of a removed alien, an offense that carries a maximum term of imprisonment of two years. Judge Dooley scheduled sentencing for February 28.

Sanchez and her daughter, [Porfiria Maribel Ramos Sanchez](#), previously pleaded guilty and await sentencing.

As part of their plea agreements, Paredes, Sanchez, and Ramos, have agreed to restitution orders of \$494,608.

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. 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.

*Updated November 22, 2024*

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