

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Middle District of Florida

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Three Defendants Sentenced in Multi-State Racketeering Conspiracy Involving Forced Labor of Mexican Agricultural H-2A Workers

Tampa, FL – Three defendants were sentenced today for their roles in a federal racketeering conspiracy that victimized over a dozen Mexican H-2A workers who had worked in the United States harvesting fruits, vegetables and other agricultural products between 2015 and 2017.

U.S. District Court Judge Charlene Edwards Honeywell for the Middle District of Florida sentenced Christina Gamez, 43, to 37 months in prison; Efrain Cabrera Rodas, 32, a citizen of Mexico, to 41 months in prison; and Guadalupe Mendes Mendoza, 45, to eight months home detention and a \$5,500 fine to be paid over 24 months supervised release. Judge Honeywell also ordered Cabrera to pay nearly \$25,000 and Gamez to pay over \$9,000 in restitution to the victims.

“These defendants exploited their victims’ vulnerabilities and immigration status, promising them access to the American dream but then turning around and confiscating their passports and threatening arrest and deportation if they did not endlessly toil away for their profit,” said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division. “The Department of Justice is committed to prosecuting those who use deception, isolation, intimidation, coercion and control to exploit their victims for compelled labor, and to ensuring that they are stripped of any profits so that the victims can rightfully use restitution proceeds to rebuild their lives.”

“Using coercive, deceptive, and fraudulent practices to exploit individuals’ immigration status to engage in a pattern of forced labor for financial gain is appalling,” said U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg for the Middle District of Florida. “Thanks to the diligent work by our human trafficking task force partners, this criminal enterprise was stopped in its tracks.”

“For their own personal enrichment, Christina Gamez and her co-defendants illegally conspired to victimize Mexican H-2A workers who came to the United States to participate in the harvest of fruits and vegetables,” said Acting Special Agent in Charge Robert M. DeWitt of the FBI Miami Field Office. “Their actions are unconscionable. The FBI and our partners will continue to pursue those in the agricultural industry who exploit vulnerable workers.”

According to court documents, the defendants each conspired to operate and manage Los Villatoros Harvesting LLC (LVH) – a farm labor contracting company that brought large numbers of temporary, seasonal Mexican workers into the United States on H-2A agricultural visas – as a criminal enterprise engaged in a pattern of racketeering activity. The enterprise’s racketeering activity included subjecting LVH’s H-2A workers to forced labor, harboring many of LVH’s H-2A workers for financial gain, committing fraud in foreign labor contracting and submitting fraudulent visa related documents to the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Labor.

Cabrera worked as a recruiter, manager and part-time supervisor for LVH. Cabrera successfully recruited approximately 40 workers to work for the criminal enterprise. He charged them fees of between \$1,000 to \$2,000 prior to coming to the United States to work for LVH, lied to them by telling them that LVH would reimburse them after their arrival in the United States, and

misrepresented how much money LVH would pay them for their harvesting work. Cabrera understood that the workers had gone into heavy debt to pay the fees he had charged them, and that he and his coconspirators could use those debts to coerce the workers into continuing to work for LVH. Cabrera also understood that coconspirators in the enterprise confiscated workers' passports for the purpose of discouraging the workers from fleeing so that they would continue laboring for LVH. Cabrera also threatened workers with arrest and deportation if they attempted to escape from the company.

Gamez worked as a bookkeeper, manager and supervisor for LVH. Gamez committed several overt acts in furtherance of the criminal enterprise. She confiscated the workers' passports and knowingly submitted fraudulent payroll documents to LVH's payroll company to make it possible for LVH to pay its workers only a very small fraction of the pay they were entitled to under their contracts for the many hours of physically demanding work they had done. She threatened workers with deportation if they did not continue to labor for LVH. Later, in an effort to mislead Department of Labor employees, she falsified payroll records and participated in preparing falsified reimbursement receipts and distributing them to H-2A workers.

Mendes worked as a supervisor and manager for LVH. In order to conceal aspects of the criminal enterprise from investigators, Mendes made false statements to federal investigators.

Earlier this year, the defendants pleaded guilty for their roles in the enterprise. Gamez and Cabrera each pleaded guilty to conspiracy under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, and Mendes pleaded guilty to conspiring to obstruct a federal investigation.

The owner of LVH, co-defendant Bladimir Moreno, 55, also pleaded guilty last month to his role in the scheme and is scheduled to be sentenced on Dec. 28. Moreno faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in federal prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. The court will determine his sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors. As part of his plea agreement, Moreno has agreed to pay more than \$173,000 in restitution to the victims.

Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg for the Middle District of Florida made the announcement.

The Palm Beach County Human Trafficking Task Force, which includes the FBI, Homeland Security Investigations, and the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, investigated the case. The Task Force received assistance from the Department of Labor Office of the Inspector General, the Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, the Department of State Diplomatic Security Service, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Colorado Legal Services Migrant Farm Worker Division, Legal Aid Services of Oregon Farmworker Program and Indiana Legal Services Worker Rights and Protection Project.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Ilyssa Spergel for the Middle District of Florida and Trial Attorneys Avner Shapiro, Maryam Zhuravitsky and Matthew Thiman of the Civil Rights Division's Criminal Section are prosecuting the case.

Anyone who has information about human trafficking should report that information to the National Human Trafficking Hotline toll-free at 1-888-373-7888, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For more information about human trafficking, please visit www.humantraffickinghotline.org. Information on the Department of Justice's efforts to combat human trafficking can be found at www.justice.gov/humantrafficking.

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