

Californians sentenced in Boston for arranging 600 sham marriages to obtain green cards

Defendants arranged sham marriages and submitted fraudulent "green card" applications for over 600 non-citizens

"BOSTON – Four California-based individuals have been sentenced in federal court in Boston for their roles in running a large-scale marriage fraud "agency" that arranged hundreds of sham marriages for the primary purpose of circumventing immigration laws. This included, among other things, obtaining green cards under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) by claiming falsely that the undocumented clients had been abused by American spouses.

The defendants, all Philippine nationals residing in Los Angeles, were arrested and charged along with seven others with conspiracy to commit marriage fraud and immigration document fraud in April 2022.



Still photos of staged wedding ceremonies

Massachusetts Department of Justice photo.

Marcialito Biol Benitez, a/k/a "Mars," 50, was sentenced on March 7, 2024 by U.S. District Court Judge Denise J. Casper to 22 months in prison and three years of supervised release. Benitez pleaded guilty in September 2023. Also on March 7, 2024, Juanita Pacson, 48, was sentenced by Judge Casper to two years of supervised release with the first four months on home detention after previously pleading guilty in September 2023.

Engilbert Ulan, 43, was sentenced on March 6, 2024 by Judge Casper to 14 months in prison and three years of supervised

release. Ulan was convicted by a federal jury in November 2023.

On Jan. 11, 2024, Nino Valmeo, 47, was sentenced by Judge Casper to three years of supervised release with the first six months on home confinement after pleading guilty in August 2023.

Benitez, with the help of co-defendants, operated what he and others referred to as an “agency” that arranged hundreds of sham marriages between foreign national “clients” and United States citizens, including at least one foreign national who resided in Massachusetts. The agency then prepared and submitted false petitions, applications and other documents to substantiate the sham marriages and secure adjustment of clients’ immigration statuses for a fee of between \$20,000 and \$35,000 in cash.



Still photo of Benitez meeting with client and U.S. Citizen spouse, in his office at the “agency”

Massachusetts Department of Justice photo.

Benitez operated the agency out of brick-and-mortar offices in Los Angeles, where he employed co-defendants Ulan and Valmeo as staff. Ulan and Valmeo assisted with arranging marriages and submitting fraudulent marriage and immigration documents for the agency’s clients. Benitez relied on several other co-conspirators to recruit U.S. citizens to marry the agency’s clients in exchange for payment.

After pairing foreign national clients with citizen spouses, Benitez’s agency staged fake wedding ceremonies at chapels, parks and other locations, performed by hired online officiants. Pacson, a friend of these co-defendants who worked

at one of the chapels, assisted with sham wedding ceremonies and marriage documents. For many clients, the agency would take photos of undocumented clients and citizen spouses in front of prop wedding decorations for later submission with immigration petitions.

Benitez's agency then submitted fraudulent, marriage-based immigration petitions to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the federal agency responsible for granting lawful permanent resident status. Benitez, Ulan, Pacson, and others, advised clients about creating and maintaining the appearance of legitimate marriage to their spouses.

For the interview, the main objective is to prove that the marriage is genuinely true. These are the keynotes that should be given an utmost care and consideration especially during the interview for possible approval:

- 1.) Couples/spouses should be able to give **THE SAME** answers to all the questions correctly and confidently.
- 2.) Couples/spouses must provide supporting documents that they have their names **TOGETHER**.
(Documents that need to be provided are listed from the letter sent by USCIS)
- 3.) Couples/spouses should show **GOOD CHEMISTRY** during the interview.

Massachusetts Department of Justice photo.

Ulan conducted practice interviews with the agency's clients and their fake spouses for the purpose of preparing couples to pass required interviews with immigration authorities. He coached the sham couples to provide the same fabricated answers to questions posed during green card interviews and conceal the fraudulent nature of the marriages.

Benitez, Ulan, Valmeo, and Pacson assisted clients with preparing fraudulent supporting documents submitted as "evidence" of the marriages' legitimacy. Ulan, Valmeo and Pacson also rented the use of their apartment addresses to clients who lived outside of Los Angeles so those clients could list these addresses as their own on green card applications and related documents, to make it appear to immigration authorities that they were living with their sham

spouses in the Los Angeles area. Ulan and Valmeo also received cash commissions for referring new clients to the agency.

Benitez's agency would assist certain clients – typically those whose spouses became unresponsive or uncooperative – with obtaining green cards under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) by claiming the undocumented clients had been abused by alleged American spouses. Specifically, Benitez, Valmeo, and others, would submit fraudulent applications on clients' behalf for temporary restraining orders against spouses based on fabricated domestic violence allegations. Benitez's agency would then submit the restraining order documentation along with immigration petitions to USCIS, in order to take advantage of VAWA provisions that permit non-citizen victims of spousal abuse to apply for lawful permanent resident status without their spouses' involvement.

Benitez's agency arranged sham marriages and submitted fraudulent immigration documents for at least 600 clients between October 2016 and March 2022.

Several co-defendants were previously sentenced by Judge Casper for their roles in this scheme. Peterson Souza, who referred non-citizens to the agency for a fee was sentenced to five months in prison and three years of supervised release with the first five months on home detention, and Felipe David, who referred clients to the agency for assistance with VAWA-based applications was sentenced to three years of supervised release.

Acting United States Attorney Joshua S. Levy; Jodi Cohen, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Office; Chad Plantz, Special Agent in Charge of Homeland Security Investigations in San Diego; and Alanna Ow, Director of U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services, San Diego District made the announcement today. The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California provided valuable assistance in this matter. Assistant U.S.

Attorneys David M. Holcomb and Leslie A. Wright of the Securities, Financial & Cyber Fraud Unit prosecuted the case.”-Massachusetts Department of Justice.