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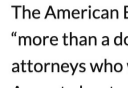
# Criminals Are Impersonating Lawyers to Steal From Immigrants

Non-native residents face a surge in scam attempts. Here's how to stay safe and find legitimate legal assistance

By Matt Alderton, AARP  
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CHANTAL IAHCHIAN (MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO/GETTY IMAGES, GETTY IMAGES)



Immigrants seeking help with their legal status are finding themselves in the crosshairs of scammers.

The American Bar Association (ABA) issued an [alert](#) in November that it had "more than a dozen reports nationwide of individuals posing as immigration attorneys who work for the ABA." It followed the organization's warning in August about an increase in such fraud cases, which the organization attributed to "rising enforcement actions, and bad actors [who] are seeking to take advantage of immigrant communities desperately seeking legal assistance."

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The ABA also cited the rise of artificial intelligence as a contributor to the scam surge. Today's technology enables criminals to easily create fake documents that appear to be issued by immigration agencies.

Amy Nofziger, senior director of victim support at the AARP Fraud Watch Network (FWN), says the [FWN Helpline](#) (877-908-3360), which offers free advice and support for scam victims, has received a number of recent calls from immigrants. One had \$10,000 stolen by criminals posing as experts who could help him complete his immigration paperwork.

"If you are meeting someone on social media promising to fix your immigration issues for a fee, it's a scam," she notes.

### Fake attorneys and federal agents

In some instances, scammers are using the names and likenesses of legitimate immigration attorneys, says Emily McCabe, pro bono counsel at the ABA's Commission on Immigration. "Scammers are going the extra mile by finding the name of a random attorney and impersonating them. They'll even use their real bar number, and the poor attorney [whose identity is stolen] has no idea this is happening," McCabe says.

Criminals are also impersonating federal agents. "I've had a lot of clients report getting fake [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement] calls, where someone claims there's a warrant or missing paperwork," says Las Vegas–based immigration attorney Meesha Moulton. "They ask for money through [gift cards](#) or wire transfers, which no official officer would ever do."

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### How to spot immigration scams

The following red flags can help citizens and noncitizens alike recognize potential immigration-related scams:

**1. Urgency.** If someone claiming to be an immigration attorney or a government official demands immediate action or payment, that's "definitely" a red flag, says McCabe. "If you have a family member who has been detained, that's obviously an urgent situation. But it's you who should be expressing the urgency. It should never be your attorney," she says.

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**2. Suspicious payment terms.** Be wary of attorneys who ask for full payment up front, says Moulton. She notes that immigration attorneys may request a small retainer initially but typically collect the rest of their fees upon completion of specific milestones in their client's case. "Immigration cases last several months to several years, so they are usually done in phases," she explains. "An attorney should always explain what their fee schedule is and why they're charging it."

**3. Requests for money through nontraditional payment methods.** When you're purchasing legal services or paying immigration fees, avoid unconventional payment methods, cautions Moulton. She explains that lawyers and government agencies typically accept payment only by check or credit card. If you're being asked to pay another way — for example, with [crypto](#), gift cards, wire transfers or payment apps like PayPal, Venmo or Zelle — "it's usually a scam," Moulton notes.

**4. Unrealistic promises.** Be wary of attorneys who offer solutions without first knowing the particulars of your situation, cautions McCabe. "A reputable attorney will typically start with a full consultation before they talk about your options," she says.

Likewise, be suspicious of attorneys or officials who make the complicated process of immigration adjudication sound easy, advises immigration attorney Leticia Leal, the clinical supervising attorney at the University of Houston Law Center's Immigration Clinic.

**5. Unsolicited communications.** Be suspicious of lawyers who make unsolicited contact, says Moulton. "We're governed by a code of ethics that basically says we can't cold-call clients," she explains. "I can advertise that I'm an immigration lawyer who handles immigration cases, but I cannot approach somebody directly and sell my services to them."

The same is generally true of government officials, who still conduct most official business by mail. "Never, ever is a federal agent going to call you or text you or email you to say, 'I'm coming unless you pay me,'" says New York–based immigration attorney Marina Shepelsky, founder and CEO of Shepelsky Law Group.

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### Tips for seeking legal assistance

Individuals who need legal assistance with immigration matters can seek reputable help from nonprofit legal services organizations specializing in immigration law, including the Immigration Advocates Network and AILA.

When doing so, keep the following best practices in mind:

- Work only with licensed immigration attorneys.** In Latin America, a *notario publico* — or notary public — is a trained legal professional who's authorized to provide legal services and advice, just like a lawyer. In the United States, however, notaries perform an entirely different function, and only attorneys can practice law. Scammers posing as "notarios" or "immigration law consultants" may exploit this confusion to defraud immigrants, according to Shepelsky, who stresses the importance of working only with licensed immigration attorneys.
- Verify attorneys' identities.** Before working with an attorney, make sure they are who they claim to be, urges Reid Trautz, senior director of the Practice and Professionalism Center at the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). He suggests verifying attorneys using the appropriate resource — typically your state's bar association or court system. The ABA can help you find the proper resource in your state. Once you identify that resource, you can use it to determine whether an individual has a law license and to obtain their official information, including their name, address, phone number and email address. You can then cross-reference those details with information given to you by the prospective attorney to ensure they match.
- Request a contract and payment schedule.** Don't engage an attorney or pay one without first obtaining a signed, written agreement, cautions Trautz. That agreement should clearly outline, in both English and your native language, the services to be provided, as well as the payment terms and schedule.
- Seek a second opinion.** If an attorney seems suspicious — because of the fee they're charging, for example, or the promises they're making — seek a second opinion, Leal suggests.
- Hire an interpreter.** If you're not a native English speaker, consider hiring an interpreter — not a semi-friend or relative but a professional — to help you read official documents or to accompany you when you're meeting with prospective lawyers or government officials, suggests Shepelsky. She says clear and accurate communication can make "every difference in the world," not only to avoid scams but also to achieve positive immigration outcomes.

### What to do if you're a victim of an immigration-related scam

Victims should always [report scams and fraud](#) to the proper authorities, including their [local police](#) and the federal government — in particular, the [FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center \(IC3\)](#). And yet, the decision to report can be a lot more fraught and complicated for immigrant communities, Moulton acknowledges.

Leal suggests that victims contact an attorney (see the above advice for finding a legitimate one) for help with next steps.

You can also reach out to the [AARP Fraud Watch Network Helpline](#), as noted above, for free advice and support.

*Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.*

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