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Official Charged With Bilking Latinos

Accused Worked In Alcohol Program

By Theresa Vargas
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The latest scam targeting area Hispanics has prompted officials with Prince William County's Alcohol Safety Action Program (ASAP) to audit several hundred files after a case manager was indicted recently on charges of soliciting bribes from clients in exchange for favorable reviews.

The case is the latest in a series of crimes against a community that authorities say often is the target of money-bilking schemes -- such as hiring day laborers who are never paid, or the activities of a mysterious woman who persuades people to let her "cleanse" their cash.

In this case, involving the Alcohol Safety Action Program, Daniel Vasquez worked with many of the Hispanic clients in the Bull Run program since 2003. The clients had all been convicted of drunken driving or drug offenses, and the Spanish-speaking Vasquez worked basically as their probation officer. But instead of giving them guidance, Vasquez took hundreds of dollars in exchange for the promise of a favorable review to the court, Prince William Commonwealth's Attorney Paul B. Ebert (D) said.

"We're all just very disappointed," said Kimball T. Peele, program director. "We're just trying to move forward and do our jobs and get these cases sorted out."

Vasquez, who has been fired, was indicted on five counts each of bribery and receiving money under false pretenses. If convicted, he could be sentenced to up to 20 years on each charge.

Even as he awaits a May 3 hearing, the program has launched an internal audit to make sure his clients received the appropriate services. So far, Peele said, the audit has found that the clients "were indeed going to treatment but were being charged more money."

Law enforcement authorities said that as Prince William's Hispanic population grows, more crimes have surfaced against Latinos. Police Maj. Ray Colgan, Prince William County assistant chief in charge of criminal investigations, said robberies against Hispanics increased greatly from 2004 to 2005.

"The immigrant community carries cash. They don't use banks," Colgan said. While he couldn't provide specific statistics, he said police have noticed a spike.

"A lot of it is just \$20 stolen here and \$30 there," Colgan said. "It's not a large amount of money, but they will be walking down the road and someone will step out of the shadows with a gun."

The Virginia Justice Center, which handles nonpayment and wage issues, receives "many calls from Prince William County," said community organizer Jennifer Johnson. There is also a fair share of complaints about scams and people trying to capitalize on the many needs of the Hispanic community:

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People promising GEDs and English classes. Immigration lawyers never fulfilling their legal duties.

There are many reasons for the scams, and the Hispanic community might be more vulnerable, she said: "People maybe not knowing their rights, not knowing what the laws are. Maybe not knowing where to complain to, maybe not feeling comfortable contacting the police," Johnson said.

Prince William Police Chief Charlie T. Deane said the department has tried to reach out to the Hispanic community through church and civic events. It has offered a Spanish-language citizens police academy and has an ongoing effort to recruit Spanish-speaking officers.

Still, there is no way to know how many crimes go unreported each year.

Manassas and Manassas Park police have reached dead ends in cases involving a Hispanic woman claiming to be a psychic. In a September case in Manassas Park, a man approached a woman at a self-service laundry and told her that she had a curse and that the only way to lift it was to see "Señora Karina." The soon-to-be victim, wearing all white and carrying \$36,000, arrived at a house on Polk Drive. Police said "Señora Karina" then had her lie on a white sheet on top of the money before leaving it "to be cleansed."

"She was told to come back the next morning, and when she came back to the house, the house was vacant," Investigator Howard Perry said.

Police suspect there are more victims, but nobody has come forward.

The case is reminiscent of several that surfaced in Manassas in April 2004. Nine victims lost a total of \$38,000 after they went to a "psychic" for body, soul and money cleansing. The psychics went by the names Tomasa, Samira and Laura. A news release at the time said, "It is believed that there are other victims that have not reported scams because of embarrassment, which is how the alleged psychics prey on their victims."

"We never got any lead on those," Rosi Tines of the Manassas police said Tuesday.

In Vasquez's case, prosecutors learned of the alleged bribes after a handful of his clients told their attorneys, officials said. The program has informed many of Vasquez's other clients about the charges through their classes, encouraging people to come forward with additional reports.

"We believe there are many more victims," Ebert said.

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