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Former deportation officer convicted of accepting bribes, harboring an undocumented immigrant and lying to US immigration authorities

NEWARK, N.J. — A federal jury convicted a Somerset, New Jersey, man Thursday for accepting cash bribes and sex in exchange for providing employment authorization documents and concealing his employment of an undocumented immigrant at a hair salon he owned. The conviction is the result of an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Office of Professional Responsibility (OPR).

Arnaldo Echevarria, 39, a former ICE deportation officer, was convicted following a one-week trial before U.S. District Judge Esther Salas in Newark federal court. The jury deliberated for one day before returning the guilty verdict.

> “This investigation of a former ICE employee underscores our commitment to aggressively identify, investigate and purse all allegations of corruption to ensure the protection our borders and maintain the integrity of the agency. This verdict sends a strong message that those who exploit their positions and our nation’s legal immigration system will be held accountable and face severe consequences,” said Keith Barwick, special agent in charge of ICE OPR Northeast Region.

According to statements made in court and evidence presented at trial:

As a deportation officer, Echevarria enforced immigration and customs laws by identifying, locating, arresting and removing undocumented immigrants from the United States. He supervised certain undocumented immigrants who had not yet been deported. Undocumented immigrants subject to a deportation order often were able to obtain employment authorization documents which allowed them to legally work in the United States for a one-year period and which could be renewed annually.

Between 2012 and 2014, Echevarria agreed to obtain employment authorization documents for undocumented immigrants who were not lawfully present in the country. In return, Echevarria demanded and received approximately $75,000 in cash bribes, and demanded and received sex from one individual. In order to conceal them from immigration authorities, Echevarria falsely stated that they had been granted temporary protected status, which allows nationals from certain countries experiencing environmental disaster, ongoing armed conflict or other extraordinary conditions to lawfully remain in the United States. None of the individuals who bribed Echevarria had actually applied for, or received, temporary protected status.

In December 2012, Echevarria received permission from his superiors at ICE to open a hair salon in West Orange, New Jersey. Echevarria certified to ICE that the hair salon would not conflict with ICE matters and would not involve undocumented workers. However, Echevarria employed his girlfriend at the time, an undocumented immigrant, to manage the salon. Echevarria's girlfriend had entered the United States illegally, using the name and identification of an individual in Puerto Rico to obtain a Pennsylvania identification card.

Echevarria knew his girlfriend resided in the United States illegally. Prior to opening the hair salon, Echevarria queried the name and date of birth of his girlfriend's alias in various law enforcement databases. After opening the salon, Echevarria ensured that his girlfriend's illegal status remained a secret by signing the lease for her apartment and by placing her cable and electric bills in his name. In addition to driving his girlfriend and other employees to and from the salon each day, Echevarria also paid the employees in cash and never asked them to fill out employment eligibility paperwork.

The six bribery counts on which Echevarria was convicted each carry a maximum potential penalty of 15 years in prison and a $250,000 fine, or twice the gross gain or loss from the offense, or three times the monetary equivalent of the things of value accepted by the defendant. The charges of harboring and making false statements are each punishable by a maximum potential penalty of five years in prison and $250,000 fine, or twice the gross gain or loss arising from the offense. Echevarria's sentencing is scheduled for June 19, 2017.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Rahul Agarwal of the U.S.

Attorney's Office Special Prosecutions Division in Newark, and Barbara Llanes, Deputy Chief of the General Crimes Unit.

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