

Council moves to protect immigrants

New legislation establishes penalties for those who pose as lawyers and take advantage of newcomers.

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Just in time for an expected surge in immigration-services fraud, Philadelphia City Council passed landmark legislation Thursday to crack down on charlatans who pose as lawyers, and others who prey on vulnerable newcomers.

Advocates for immigrants say President Obama's recent executive action on immigration brought such phony experts out of the woodwork. Typically, they charge for documents that are available free, make false promises about speeding the process, and commit other rip-offs.

"The most powerful tool people have to protect themselves is information about how the world is supposed to work," testified Amanda Bergson-Shilcock of the nonprofit Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. "Newcomers are looking for cues and clues. ... This ordinance establishes clear standards for acceptable practice."

Sponsored by Councilman Dennis O'Brien, the ordinance regulates advertising claims, translation, document procurement, and other services. When the person who offers assistance is not a lawyer, the ordinance requires bold-face signage to that effect. Violators risk fines and the loss of their commercial-service licenses.

Attorney William Stock of the American Immigration Lawyers

Association, which has 280 lawyers in its Philadelphia chapter, testified that “immigration is regulated by federal law, but its impact is local.”

In her testimony, Maria Sotomayor of the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition said the scams, also known as “*notario* fraud” after the Spanish word for a person who does some types of legal work, were a widespread but until now unaddressed problem, not only in the Latino community, but among Chinese, Indonesian, and African immigrants. The ordinance was passed unanimously. Mayor Nutter will sign it, said his spokesman, Mark Mc-Donald. mmatza@phillynews.com
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