

California Church Leaders Charged With Forced Labor, Trafficking of Homeless

California church leaders were charged with forced labor and human trafficking of homeless people.

According to CNN, a dozen leaders at Imperial Valley Ministries (IVM) in El Centro, California, allegedly promised food and shelter to people in need if they begged for money nine hours a day, six days per week and gave their welfare benefits to the church. IVM works in the U.S. and Mexico through nondenominational churches and group homes.

Charges include conspiracy, forced labor, document servitude and benefits fraud, says U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer in a statement.

“The indictment alleges an appalling abuse of power by church officials who preyed on vulnerable homeless people with promises of a warm bed and meals,” Brewer says. “These victims were held captive, stripped of their humble financial means, stripped of their identification, their freedom and their dignity.”

Allegations against the church date back to 2013, reports NBC San Diego, and involve dozens of victims from 17 to 60 years old.

The incident that alerted authorities to investigate involved a 17-year-old male who had to break windows that were nailed shut in order to escape an IVM home. He ran to a nearby property and called the police, says Brewer.

One woman posted a review on IVM’s unofficial Facebook page, calling the ministry a “cult.”

“My daughter was there for 7 months,” Judy Eddie Medrano wrote. “They did help her be clean that’s something that I am grateful for but I am not grateful for the things they would tell her for the way [they] would treat her they try to put her against her family and they try to take the baby over there so that they can keep the food stamps of course they don’t let the girls shower appropriately they shower every few days sometimes they don’t meet their quota they stretch out their day even [if] its a hot summer day and they’re only allowed to get a dollar fifty to get something to eat or something to drink.”

According to the church’s website, Fernando and Ofelia Rivas founded the ministry that Pastor Joey and Rachel Rivas now lead. {eoa}