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Former Employees of Community Legal Aid SoCal Plead Guilty

On December 12, 2019, as a result of a joint investigation by the District Attorney's (DAs) Office, Orange County, California (CA), the Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the OIG for the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), Melissa Luna and Maria Cancino, former employees of Community Legal Aid SoCal (SoCal), were arrested.

SoCal is a non-profit organization that provides free civil legal representation to qualifying individuals in Orange County, CA. SoCal is a federally funded organization and annually receives over four million dollars in federal dollars from the LSC and HUD.

As part of their scheme, Luna and Cancino diverted SoCal clients in need of relief from mortgage foreclosure to their illegitimate business. Luna and Cancino defrauded SoCal clients by improperly charging up-front fees and providing misleading legal advice and services, which ultimately led to the foreclosure of the clients' homes. Upon arrest, Luna was charged with 35 counts and Cancino with 36 counts, including Grand Theft, Burglary, Attempted Grand Theft, Theft of Personal Property, and Unauthorized Advertising or Practice of Law.

On December 6, 2021, in Superior Court, Orange County, CA, Luna and Cancino pled guilty to multiple counts of Grand Theft, one count of Theft of Personal Property, and one count of Unauthorized Practice of Law. Sentencing for Luna and Cancino is scheduled for June 6, 2022.

Jeffrey E. Schanz, Inspector General, OIG, LSC, praised the work completed by the Orange County, CA, DA's office, saying: "The defendants in this case violated the trust of low-income clients in need of legitimate, free legal assistance in the hope of saving their homes. We hope this case acts as a significant deterrent for those inclined to seek their personal enrichment by misleading clients in dire need of professional legal services."