

FEDS: SIX CHARGED IN LI 'BIRTH TOURISM' SCHEME

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Long Island federal prosecutors on Wednesday charged six people with operating what officials called a massive illegal "birth tourism" scheme in which dozens of pregnant Turkish women paid up to \$10,000 to give birth in Suffolk County so that their children would have U.S. citizenship.

The operators of the scheme, mostly Long Island residents with Turkish backgrounds, were charged with Medicaid fraud because part of the scheme involved the women claiming they were indigent, which enabled them to receive Medicaid. The government ended up paying \$2.1 million for their care while in the country, officials said.

The 117 women, who gave birth to 119 children, were in fact of middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds who came into the country under tourist or business visas, according to officials. They were counseled not to disclose that they were pregnant when they entered the United States between 2017 and 2020, officials said at a news conference at the Suffolk District Attorney's Office in Hauppauge.

"The defendants cashed in on the desire for birthright citizenship, and the American taxpayer ultimately got stuck with the \$2.1 million bill," said Acting Eastern District U.S. Attorney Seth D. DuCharme. "The indictment today reinforces the principle that American citizenship is not for sale, and that our benefit programs are not piggy banks for criminals to plunder."

Officials said that while the women were in the United States, they lived in six so-called "birth houses" in Center Moriches, Dix Hills, East Northport, East Patchogue, Smithtown and West Babylon.

Suffolk Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart said the investigation began when police got a tip from an unidentified Smithtown clerk who became suspicious after seeing five pregnant women in the same house over a short period of time.

Shortly after, Eastern District federal prosecutors, investigators from Suffolk County District Attorney Timothy Sini's office, federal agents from Homeland Security Investigations and state investigators joined the probe, officials said.

The women were recruited into the scheme in two Turkish-language Facebook pages whose title in English roughly translates into "My baby should be born in America" and "Giving Birth in America," official said.

Officials said language on the pages included: "If you believe your baby should be born in the USA and become a citizen then you are in the right place ...[W]e ...

will provide future mothers and fathers this opportunity, with minimal costs."

The literature promoting the scheme said the price was reasonable so that mothers and fathers could afford to give "their baby this beautiful gift."

The Facebook pages claimed that the organization had arranged for more than 800 births.

The pages for the scheme said that the prospective mothers would be housed in "a luxurious and up kept two story house" in an unidentified community 45 minutes from New York City, officials said.

The house, the literature said, had five bedrooms, each named after a different borough of New York.

Pregnant women were promised that their fee, which ranged between \$7,500 and \$10,000, would cover everything from housing to transportation to "insurance" coverage. The "insurance" turned out to be the fraudulent Medicaid payments, officials said. Several of the defendants were described as having been "professionally trained and certified to assist individuals to apply for health care" such as Medicaid, officials said.

The defendants, meanwhile, collected \$750,000 from the women for themselves, officials said. The money taken in by the scheme from the women was mainly deposited in banks in Turkey and probably out of the reach of seizure by U.S. officials, prosecutors said.

A large number of the women were professionals, including doctors and flight attendants on Turkish airlines, according to sources familiar with the investigation.

The women returned to Turkey and were not charged, and their babies are "most likely" to keep their United States citizenships, DuCharme said.

The defendants — four Turkish nationals and two U.S. citizens — face charges of health care fraud, conspiracy to commit visa and wire fraud and money laundering.

They were identified as Ibrahim Aksakal, 48, of East Patchogue; Enes Burak Cakiroglu, 24, also of East Patchogue; Sarah Kaplan (also known as "Hatun Kaplan" and "Hatin Kaplan") 46, of Center Moriches; Fiordalista Marte, 41, of Lindenhurst; Edgar Rodriguez, 48, of Farmingville; and a sixth defendant identified only as Indicted Co-conspirator #1.

At their telephonic arraignment at federal court in Central Islip, Aksakal and Cakiroglu were ordered held without bail, Rodriguez and Marte were released on a \$50,000 bond; and Kaplan was confined to home detention with electronic monitoring for one night and is due back in court Thursday afternoon. Cakiroglu's attorney, Peter Brill, declined to comment.

They each face up to 20 years in prison if convicted, officials said.



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