

7,600 Fake Nursing Diplomas Were Sold in Scheme, U.S. Says

Twenty-five people were charged this week in connection with the scheme, which involved the sale of fake transcripts and diplomas issued by three Florida schools, prosecutors said.

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More than two dozen people have been charged in connection with a scheme in which fake nursing diplomas were sold to buyers who then used the credentials to obtain nursing licenses and jobs in health care settings across the country, federal prosecutors said.

The scheme involved the sale of more than 7,600 fake diplomas issued by three South Florida nursing schools, which have since closed: Siena College and Sacred Heart International Institute, both in Broward County, and Palm Beach School of Nursing in Palm Beach County, prosecutors said.

The 25 people charged this week include administrators of the Florida schools and administrators and affiliates of a series of nursing test prep academies in other states that recruited candidates to buy the fake diplomas, said Omar Pérez Aybar, special agent in charge for the Miami region of the Office of Inspector General at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Many of the people who paid for the fraudulent credentials already had experience working in health care — for example, as certified nursing assistants — and were hoping to qualify as registered nurses or licensed practical nurses without having to complete the required courses and clinical work, Mr. Pérez Aybar said in an interview on Thursday.

Buyers paid between \$10,000 and \$15,000 to obtain bogus diplomas and transcripts indicating that they had earned legitimate degrees, like the associate degree in nursing, Mr. Pérez Aybar said. That degree can take two years to complete.

The diplomas and transcripts then allowed the buyers to qualify for the national nursing board exam, prosecutors said. About 37 percent of those who bought the fake documents — or about 2,800 people — passed the exam, Mr. Pérez Aybar said.

Among that group, a “significant number” then received nursing licenses and secured jobs in hospitals and other health care settings, Mr. Pérez Aybar said.

Court documents did not name those institutions, but said they included Veterans Affairs hospitals in Maryland and New York, a hospital in Georgia, a skilled nursing facility in Ohio, a rehabilitation center in New York and an assisted-living facility in New Jersey.

The U.S. attorney’s office for the Southern District of Florida said the fraud scheme had “created an illegal licensing and employment shortcut for aspiring nurses.”

“Not only is this a public safety concern, it also tarnishes the reputation of nurses who actually complete the demanding clinical and course work required to obtain their professional licenses and employment,” Markenzy Lapointe, the U.S. attorney, said in a statement.

Chad Yarbrough, special agent in charge of the F.B.I. field office in Miami, said that health care fraud was “nothing new to South Florida, as many scammers see this as a way to earn easy, though illegal, money.”

“What is disturbing about this investigation is that there are over 7,600 people around the country with fraudulent nursing credentials who are potentially in critical health care roles treating patients,” Mr. Yarbrough said in the statement.

Federal officials called the investigation “Operation Nightingale,” after Florence Nightingale, the British nurse regarded as the founder of modern nursing. Each defendant faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted on charges that include wire fraud and conspiracy to commit wire fraud, the U.S. attorney’s office said.

None of the buyers of the fake diplomas were charged in connection with the scheme, although Mr. Pérez Aybar said that they knew that they were paying for fake credentials. He said the authorities had sent the names of the recipients to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, whose members include nursing regulators in the 50 states.

The council said in a statement that nursing regulators in the affected states “have been investigating individual cases and are taking appropriate action, in accordance with their state laws and due process, that includes loss of license.”

Mr. Pérez Aybar said that investigators had not uncovered any evidence of “patient harm at the hands of these individuals.”

The charges were announced about 18 months after two Florida residents, Geralda Adrien and Woosvelt Predestin, were indicted in connection with the scheme. Prosecutors said that Ms. Adrien and Mr. Predestin helped people procure fraudulent nursing diplomas and transcripts by falsely documenting that the buyers had completed the necessary courses and clinical work.

Ms. Adrien was the president of a company that had advertised itself on social media as “a group of nurses and doctors who want to empower men and women by helping them to become health care providers,” prosecutors said. Mr. Predestin was an employee of that company, prosecutors said.

Mr. Predestin’s lawyers said that he was a father of two who immigrated to the United States from Haiti in 2019 and lived with Ms. Adrien, his sister-in-law, in exchange for his help around the house.

Her requests then escalated into asking for his help with the diploma fraud scheme, the lawyers wrote in court documents. Ms. Adrien did not pay Mr. Predestin for his participation in the scheme, and it was “not in his culture nor did he learn during his upbringing to question those who are providing him room and board,” the lawyers wrote.

Both pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit mail fraud and wire fraud and were sentenced last year to 27 months in prison, according to court documents. Mr. Pérez Aybar said that Ms. Adrien and Mr. Predestin had cooperated in the investigation.

News of the scheme was “extremely unsettling,” said Jennifer Mensik Kennedy, the president of the American Nurses Association.

“Nursing is without a doubt a highly specialized and ethical profession requiring rigorous and lifelong education and training to acquire unmatched clinical expertise,” she said in a statement. “You don’t achieve this overnight. There are no shortcuts in nursing.”