

Former Hatch Motor salesman targeted Navajo elders

ST. MICHAELS, Ariz. — Francisco Lerma, a former salesperson with Winslow Ford, Tate's Auto Center and Hatch Motor, was sentenced March 22 in the Navajo County Superior Court after pleading guilty to four counts of fraudulent scheme and artifices.

The charge is a class two felony. Lerma will serve six years to run concurrently in the Department of Corrections with 338 days credit and three years supervised probation. In his plea agreement, Lerma also agreed to pay restitution to victims, which will be determined by the parties involved.

During the sentencing hearing and on behalf of the Commission, Varvara Phillips, a human rights investigator, provided a written statement to the court indicating that, "Mr. Lerma knew exactly who to victimize; and, it was our Navajo elders who are most vulnerable and easily coerced. Our Navajo elders trusted Mr. Lerma and this trust was based on the Navajo culture and traditions in that word are sacred. When words are spoken, it should be spoken with care, meaningfulness and honesty. However, Mr. Lerma willingly and knowingly took money from our Navajo elders for his own benefit."

In 2015, the Winslow Police Department, after receiving calls from Navajo citizens, began an investigation to the allegations of theft by Lerma. The WPD, having knowledge that the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission was also investigating written complaints filed by Navajo citizens regarding vehicle purchase from border town automobile dealers, contacted the Commission.

In 2016, the Commission met with and advocated for the Navajo County Attorney's Office to pursue the filing of criminal charges against Lerma. Thus, the Commission began providing its assistance such as Navajo interpretation and contacting and meeting with Navajo victims.

The Commission is exploring business friendly standards that patronizing a border town business with a "Navajo seal of Approval" will assure a Navajo consumer that their money will be spend fairly and without unscrupulous deals that financially harm Navajo consumers. The

Auto sales rep sentenced for fraud

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Navajo seal of Approval will benefit both the consumer and the business by bringing respect and trust back into commerce.

For more information please contact the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission at 928-871-7436.