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# CALIFORNIA CONSUMER ALERT

Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara

## Department of Insurance warns drivers about vehicle hostage scam sweeping Southland

*Department PSA follows arraignment of 16 residents in alleged auto insurance fraud ring*

The California Department of Insurance issued a [PSA](#) with a warning for California drivers about an increase in scams involving tow truck companies targeting car accident victims where vehicles are being held hostage for cash. The scam has become prevalent in Southern California and the Department's Inland Empire Automobile Insurance Fraud Task Force, has investigated multiple cases including one that has resulted in the arraignment and charges against 16 Southern California residents.

This task force investigation found the auto fraud ring allegedly conspired together to create fraudulent insurance claims to illegally collect over \$216,932. The investigation discovered the large-scale organized auto insurance fraud ring was engaged in multiple types of schemes including holding vehicles hostage and collusive collisions. This same ring was [previously charged](#) in a similar scheme stemming from vehicles stolen under false pretenses and brought to California Collision in San Bernardino County.



One of the scams in this case involves a tow truck showing up immediately after a collision occurs and offering to help the driver by towing their vehicle to a body shop. Then the body shop forces the driver to pay a large amount of money typically not covered by your insurance in order to get your vehicle back.

“This type of scam is preying on drivers at their most vulnerable moments—immediately after an accident—when they should be focused on their safety and next steps, not fighting to get their vehicle back,” said Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara. “Our department is committed to protecting Californians from fraud, and this PSA is an important step in ensuring drivers know the warning signs and how to protect themselves. If you suspect you’ve been targeted, report it immediately. Together, we can put an end to these predatory practices and hold bad actors accountable.”

There are a few red flags drivers should be aware of to make sure they are not a victim of this type of scam:

- Tow truck shows up within minutes of accident, you may not even have had time to call anyone yet.
- Tow truck driver tells you which body shop your car is going to instead of working with you to identify where you want your vehicle to go.
- Tow truck driver tells you someone will contact you by phone or asks you to sign documents.
- Tow truck driver requests a rideshare for you.

The Department urges drivers if they believe they may be in a situation like this to verify the tow truck with your insurance company or wait for CHP to verify the tow truck was dispatched by CHP. Also, do not sign any documents until you have talked to their insurance company. For more information on how to protect yourself

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or to [report suspected fraud](https://insurance.ca.gov), contact the California Department of Insurance at 800-927-4357 or online at [insurance.ca.gov](https://insurance.ca.gov).

The Inland Empire Automobile Insurance Task Force began this investigation in November 2022 after they found out a California Highway Patrol non-sworn employee, Rosa Isela Santistevan, 56, of Irvine, was unlawfully selling traffic collision report face pages, which contained personal information of people who had been involved in collisions throughout Southern California.

The investigating task force includes the California Department of Insurance, California Highway Patrol, San Bernardino County District Attorney's Office, and the Riverside County District Attorney's Office. The State of California Franchise Tax Board also assisted with the investigation.

After the task force served numerous search warrants they seized over 3,500 CHP traffic collision report face pages from the residence of Esmeralda Parga, 27, of Pomona, who the task force determined was connected to Santistevan through the organized ring's ringleader, Andre Angelo Reyes, 37, of Corona. The conspiracy began after Reyes befriended Santistevan and other CHP employees by donating to various CHP events and parties. Santistevan printed and unlawfully sold thousands of traffic collision face pages to Reyes who would then provide the reports to E. Parga. E. Parga would then contact the parties involved in the collision, pretending to be from their insurance company and coordinate having their vehicle towed to a repair center that they misrepresented as approved by the insurance company.

Unbeknownst to the victims, E. Parga did not represent the insurance company and was stealing the victims' vehicles. Reyes and E. Parga would then dispatch tow trucks, whose drivers cooperated in the scheme and would pick up the vehicles in Riverside County and tow them to Certified Auto in Buena Park, owned by Anthony Gomez, 36, of Jurupa Valley. Once the vehicles were at Certified Auto, Certified Auto would hold the vehicle hostage and demand cash payment from the insurance companies to have the vehicles released.

During the numerous search warrants, additional evidence was obtained showing the alleged ring was engaged in other types of insurance fraud schemes, including collusive collisions.

The Riverside County District Attorney's Office has also charged Reyes and Diana Villa Pineda, 34, of Corona with tax evasion of \$136,408.

The Riverside County District Attorney's Office is prosecuting this case.

**Defendants include:**

- Andre Angelo Reyes, 37, of Corona
- Diana Pineda Villa, 34, of Corona
- Rosa Isela Santistevan, 56, of Irvine
- Esmeralda Parga, 27, of Pomona
- Anthony Gomez, 36, of Jurupa Valley
- Antonio Terrazas Perez Jr., 20, of Los Angeles
- Israel Avila Sandoval, 46, of Pomona
- Luis Alberto Ramirez Jr., 32, of San Bernardino
- Antonio Ramirez Perez, 45, of Los Angeles
- Brian Anthony Lopez, 25, of Anaheim
- Emily Marie Boatman, 27, of Ontario
- Ricardo Parga Jr., 24, of Pomona

- Steven Anthony Alfaro, 39, of Buena Park
- Henry Castellano, 68, of Whittier
- Elizabeth Gutierrez, 34, of Long Beach
- Steve Allen Higgs, 72, of Corona



**Exciting News! ✨** The California Department of Insurance (CDI) is proud to introduce the **Community Outreach and Education Partnership Initiative**. This dynamic program is designed to raise consumer awareness about CDI's vital services and expand understanding of key insurance topics and fraud prevention. Become a valued partner and unlock exclusive access to:

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