

# California Church Leaders Arrested for Alleged Forced Labor of Homeless People

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It's nothing new guys, don't worry. It's been the case for like 1700 years, it's called the Middle Ages. It's just the xians feel sometimes they could ignore everything that has changed since and still make people do SLAVE LABOR against their will for Rabbi Jeboo and stuff.

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## **California church leaders arrested for alleged forced labor of homeless people**

By: Ann Smajstrla, Cox Media Group National Content Desk

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A dozen leaders of a California-based church have been indicted by a grand jury on charges that they forced homeless people to labor for the church's benefit.

The leaders, including the church's pastor, were arrested Wednesday in California and Texas and charged with conspiracy, forced labor, document servitude and benefits fraud, according to a statement from the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Southern District of California.

"The indictment alleges an appalling abuse of power by church officials who preyed on vulnerable homeless people with promises of a warm bed and meals," U.S. Attorney Robert Brewer said. "These victims were held captive, stripped of their humble financial means, their identification, their freedom and their dignity."

The defendants work for Imperial Valley Ministries, a nondenominational church based in El Centro, California, that has 30 locations throughout the country. The church's stated purpose is to "'restore' drug addicts at faith-based rehabilitation group homes and raise money to open churches in other cities to do the same," according to the statement. The organization owns and operates five group homes in California.

The church encouraged homeless people to join group homes by offering free food and shelter, and falsely promising that victims would be provided with

resources to eventually return home, according to the statement.

But upon settling in at the homes, alleged victims said they were held at the properties against their will, the statement said. Prosecutors said church leaders confiscated victims' identification documents to prevent them from leaving, stole victims' welfare benefits, and required they adhere to rules such as, "you are not to discuss things of the world" and "the only thing to be read is the holy bible."

The victims were also allegedly forced to panhandle for up to nine hours a day, six days a week, and then turn over any money to the church.

"Dozens of victims have alleged the same thing -- once they were inside the group homes, the IVM had become a venture designed to keep as many as people as possible for as long as possible," assistant U.S. District Attorney Chris Tenorio said in a press conference, according to CNN.

At one point, a 17-year-old victim broke through a window of a group home and ran to a neighbor, telling them to call the police, according to the statement.

Another victim, who is diabetic, was allegedly denied medical supplies, medicine and food in response to low blood sugar, prosecutors said. She was able to leave and get help.

All of the identified victims are now free, prosecutors said. The church hasn't responded to media requests for comment.

Pastor Victor Gonzales, one of the defendants, spoke to the Imperial Valley Press last year when the FBI raided the group homes and main church office.

"I don't think I did anything bad," he said at the time. "Whatever the accusations are, we didn't do any of that."