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COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

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**District Attorney's Real Estate Fraud Prosecution Program
Fiscal Year 2024 - 2025 Annual Report**

Cases

- *People v. Pauline Macareno*

This case continues from the prior fiscal year. It involves a 96-year-old victim, Violet Alberts, who was persuaded to take out a short-term, high-interest loan secured by her Montecito home. Following an extensive investigation by investigators from the District Attorney's Bureau of Investigations, the District Attorney's Office filed an 11-count complaint against Pauline Macareno alleging elder abuse, forgery, identity theft, filing forged documents, and special allegations of excessive loss. Shortly before Macareno was arrested on the District Attorney's complaint, Alberts was found murdered in her home.

Previously, Macareno pled guilty to all counts and received a six-year state prison sentence as a result of the plea. She was also required to quitclaim the house back to the estate of the victim and pay \$68,996.78 in restitution to the estate. The District Attorney's Real Estate Fraud (REF) Unit had previously located and frozen over \$127,000 in cash belonging to the defendant, and as a result, the estate was able to be repaid in full.

This case has moved into the second phase of prosecution, and Macareno has been charged with conspiracy to murder Alberts for financial gain related to the attempted theft of Alberts' home. Macareno and three others are currently pending trial in connection with this scheme. The case is anticipated to go to trial in 2026.

- *People v. Isaac Nganga*

This case continues from the prior fiscal year. It was initially referred as an elder abuse case involving theft from an elderly woman. However, District Attorney investigators followed up on the initial report and found that the defendant had allegedly convinced the woman to take out a mortgage on her home to invest in an apartment building he claimed to be developing in Africa. He also allegedly persuaded the woman to leave all of her assets to him via a new trust.

Through quick action and in coordination with the bank and the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office, District Attorney investigators were able to stop the transfer of most of the money to the defendant. Investigators also directed the woman to resources to redraft her trust so that her assets would be given to her intended beneficiaries.

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Statistics

District Attorney's Real Estate Fraud Prosecution Program					
	FY 2020-2021	FY 2021-2022	FY 2022-2023	FY 2023-2024	FY 2024-2025
Referrals	9	28	12	23	20
Investigations	9	14	10	23	20
Cases Filed	0	3	2	4	2
Convictions	0	0	1	2	0

Highlights

- The District Attorney's REF Unit again spent a significant amount of time at the County Clerk-Recorder-Assessor's Office during Fiscal Year 2024-2025. This coordination helped locate allegedly fraudulent filings, such as a \$58,000,000 Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) financing statement filed against two unknowing victims.
- The District Attorney's REF Unit continues to use innovative strategies, such as asset seizures, to secure justice for victims in Santa Barbara County. The Unit also engages in outreach to local agencies to assist with training on real –estate fraud-related issues. This includes presentations to local real estate groups and appearances on local media outlets. This past fiscal year, the REF Unit conducted 15 separate outreach events.

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