

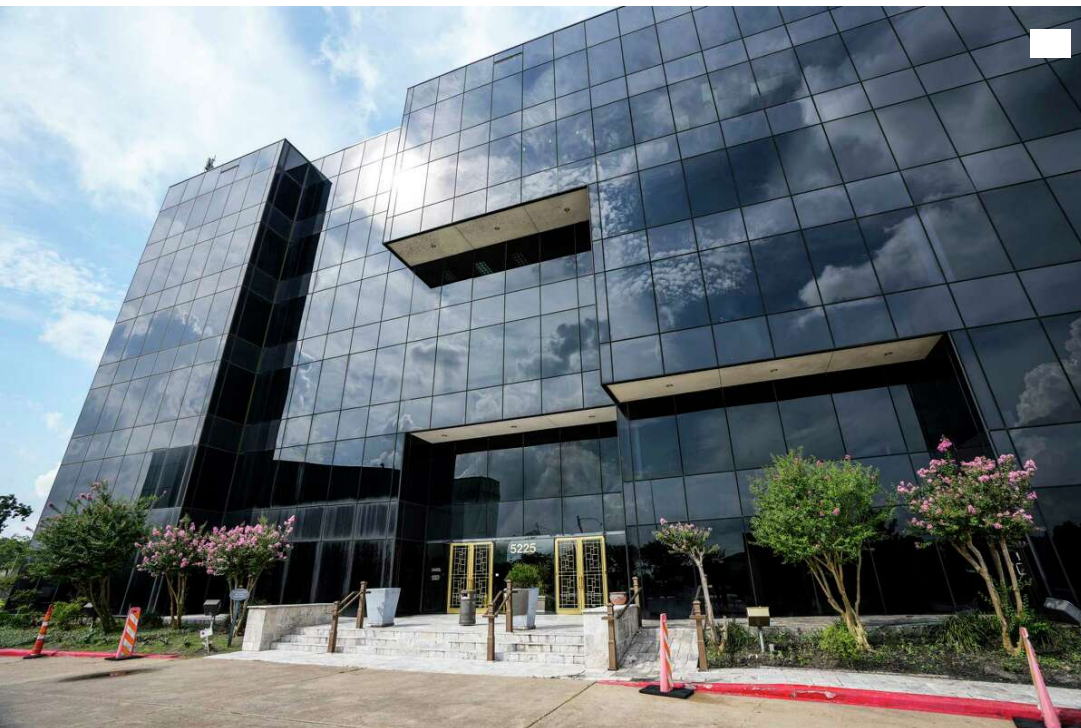
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BUSINESS

Harris County to investigate Houston title company accused of 'scamming' homeowners

 Erica Grieder, Staff writer

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The office building in the 5200 block of the Katy Freeway that houses an office of Patriot Title is shown on Tuesday, July 4, 2023 in Houston. Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee has announced a consumer fraud investigation into Patriot Title, which has several locations in the Houston area. Brett Coomer/Staff photographer

Harris County is investigating a Houston title company accused of “scamming” dozens of area families in real estate transactions and in some cases depriving them of long-held family properties.

Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee last week said his office “is starting the process to sue” Patriot Title and its principal, Rachel Luna. Patriot is a title and escrow company headquartered in Houston that has been sued more than 20 times over the past decade for fraudulent schemes, Menefee said.

Title companies typically act as neutral parties in the homebuying process, verifying that sellers own the properties they are trying to sell; escrow companies hold funds and documents until a transaction is completed.

“Over the last 10 years, dozens of people in our communities have accused these companies of scamming people in real estate transactions,” Menefee said at a June 28 press conference, where he was joined by Harris County Precinct 4 Commissioner Lesley Briones and members of two families who say they were victims. “So today we’re here to say enough is enough, and Harris County is stepping in.”

Patriot Title did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Luna and Patriot Title have, Menefee said, been accused of receiving escrow funds from a buyer and refusing to release them to a seller after a sale is closed; serving as the title company in transactions involving a forged deed; knowingly selling property the company does not own; and failing to disclose title defects, among other things.

MORE: [Menefee thinks state leaders have been ‘pushing us around’. He intends to push back](#)

“Buying a home is one of the most important decisions that people or a family can make,” Menefee said. “It is at times an incredibly scary process that to new, first-time homebuyers can be something that’s incredibly intimidating.”

“The process of buying a home is complex and confusing,” added Briones, an attorney and former civil court judge. “We need to be sure that everyone here in Harris County is treated fairly.”

Members of several families who have battle Patriot Title spoke at the press conference. One of them, Charles Kelly, said that he and his family have been tied up in litigation with Patriot since 2018 after trying to sell a family home in Acres Homes.

“Patriot decided to go ahead and buy it from us, and we didn’t hear from them again,” Kelly said. “The only thing we heard was that our house had been destroyed, in our Acres Homes neighborhood. They didn’t contact us on anything; they didn’t try to tell us that they were destroying the house and they didn’t give us any kind of funds.”

Patriot Title lists 11 locations in the Houston area on its website, as well as one in El Paso and several more set to open in that city.

The county attorney’s office represents Harris County and related entities in lawsuits and other civil matters. It also provides legal advice to county officials and employees.

Menefee said that in addition to initiating the lawsuit, his office also is in contact with the Texas Department of Insurance over Patriot Title’s license. Part of the purpose in announcing the investigation, Menefee and Briones said, is to identify others who may have had adverse experiences with Patriot Title in Harris County.

“When I talk about these 20 lawsuits, I’m just talking about the people who have the time and the money to be able to go out and hire a lawyer to file these lawsuits,” Menefee said. “There could be many more people throughout our county who have been victimized by Patriot Title and these entities.”

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Erica Grieder is a business reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

She joined the Houston Chronicle, as a metro columnist, in 2017. Prior to that she spent ten years based in Austin, reporting on politics and economics, as the southwest correspondent for The Economist, from 2007-2012, then as a senior editor at Texas Monthly, from 2012-2016. In 2013, she published her first book, "Big, Hot, Cheap, and Right: What America Can Learn from the Strange Genius of Texas." An Air Force brat, Erica thinks of San Antonio as home. She is a member of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas's Emerging Leaders Council, and holds degrees from the University of Texas at Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs and Columbia University, where she majored in philosophy.
