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Bexar County paying out another \$347K to Pct. 2 deputies targeted by Barrientes Vela

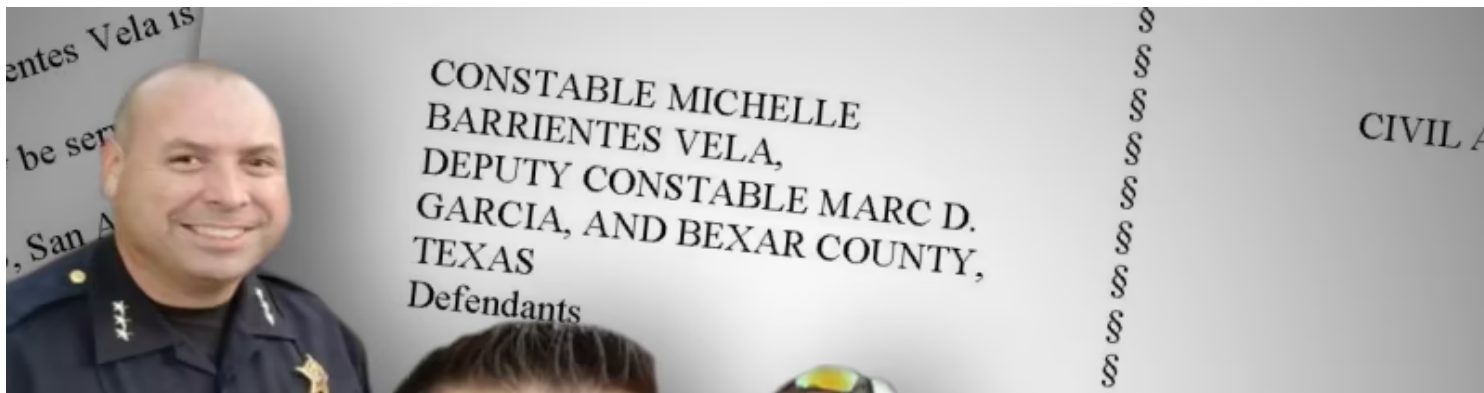
Settlements for deputies Leonicio Moreno, Christopher De La Cerda are in addition to \$120K paid out to third deputy earlier this year

Dillon Collier, Investigative Reporter

Published: **June 17, 2021, 11:05 AM**

Updated: **June 17, 2021, 5:00 PM**

Tags: **Defenders, Michelle Barrientes Vela, Bexar County Precinct 2**



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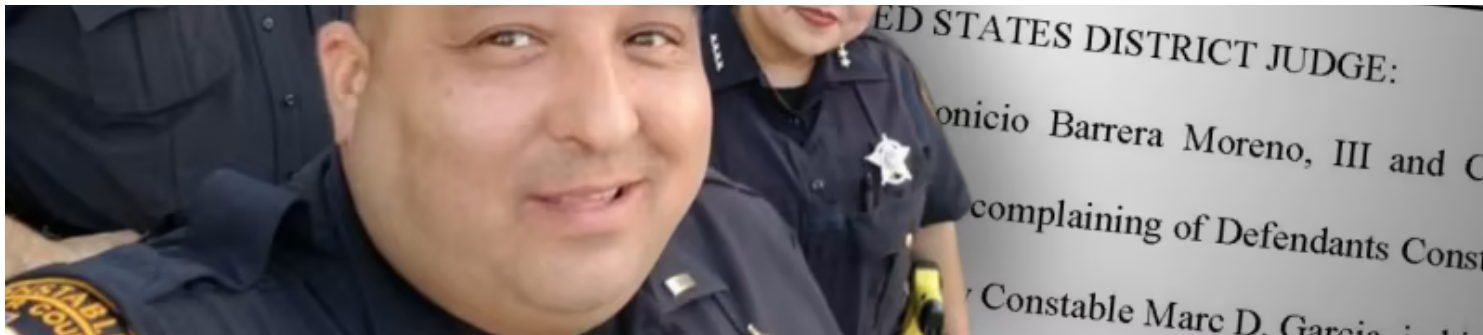
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Precinct 2 deputies Leonicio Moreno (left), Christopher De La Cerda (middle) and indicted ex-constable Michelle Barrientes Vela (right). (Joshua Saunders, KSAT)



SAN ANTONIO – UPDATE: *This article now includes a statement from the civil attorney for Michelle Barrientes Vela and Marc D. Garcia*

Bexar County has agreed to pay the Precinct 2 deputies at the center of a public corruption case against Michelle Barrientes Vela more than \$347,000. The money will be used to settle a flurry of lawsuits filed by the deputies against the indicted ex-constable.

Deputy Leonicio Moreno has received \$215,000 as part of a mediated settlement, while Deputy Christopher De La Cerda received \$132,500, an attorney representing Bexar County confirmed to the KSAT 12 Defenders Wednesday.

The payouts settle the multiple claims filed against Barrientes Vela by the duo in both state and federal court.

WATCH: ‘Downfall:’ The story of ex-Constable Michelle Barrientes Vela, a KSAT 12 Defenders special

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A federal lawsuit filed in the summer of 2019 accused Barrientes Vela and her then-captain, Marc D. Garcia, of conspiring to deprive Moreno and De La Cerda of their constitutional rights after Moreno filed paperwork to run against the constable in the 2020 election.

At the center of the suit was Moreno's April 2019 arrest on a charge of aggravated perjury, after Precinct 2 leadership accused him of lying in two U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints filed earlier that year.

A Defenders investigation later revealed that fellow Precinct 2 deputies delayed booking Moreno until the media arrived.

Prosecutors dismissed the felony charge against Moreno hours after he was booked.

Bexar County District Attorney Joe Gonzales later said he did not believe Moreno committed a crime.

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Moreno and De La Cerda were previously terminated in 2018 after Barrientes Vela stated they falsified training records.

Both deputies were reinstated months later after **they appealed the firing**. During that civil service hearing, Moreno said the constable had set him up to fail as training coordinator by prohibiting him from

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during a work trip in a hotel hot tub.

County spokeswoman Monica Ramos, who has repeatedly previously said the county does not comment on pending litigation, said via email Thursday morning officials would not comment on the settlements.

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Earlier this year Bexar County officials agreed to pay former Precinct 2 Deputy Josh Ruiz in excess of \$120,000 as part of an out-of-court settlement, stemming from his separate 2019 lawsuit filed against the county.

Ruiz sued Bexar County in December 2019, claiming that Barrientes Vela “took deliberate, calculated measures to reshape the department into a cadre of young, inexperienced loyalist deputies and rid herself of older, senior and more experienced officers when she was not otherwise engaging in chicanery such as charging the county for training exercises that she did not attend.”

The suit, which alleged age discrimination violations, referred to Barrientes Vela as “the poster child of government done wrong” and said she forced out the 16-year veteran of Precinct 2 after being required to trim staff.

Ruiz was eventually able to get a job with the Bexar County Fire Marshal’s Office.

Moreno and De La Cerda, meanwhile, were reinstated to Precinct 2 **shortly after Barrientes Vela was removed from office in late 2019.**

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Both deputies continue to serve as supervisors with the agency.

The indicted ex-constable won a legal victory in her criminal case late last month, after prosecutors dismissed the aggravated perjury charge against her.

The circumstances of that case, which come from Moreno's April 2019 arrest, will instead be introduced during the punishment phase if Barrientes Vela is convicted of any of the remaining five criminal charges against her, according to dismissal records.

Several of those remaining charges, three counts of misdemeanor official oppression, stem from Barrientes Vela's alleged treatment of Moreno and De La Cerda.

An indictment states that she harassed, retaliated or discriminated against both Moreno and De La Cerda at work as far back as August 2017, or directed other employees of the Precinct 2 office to do so.

Garcia still faces the aggravated perjury charge, as well as the official oppression charges, court records show.

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Mark Anthony Sanchez, the attorney representing Barrientes Vela and Garcia in the civil claims, released the following statement late Thursday afternoon:

Michelle Barrientes Vela and Marc D. Garcia raised formidable defenses against the meritless allegations made by the Plaintiffs. They fiercely denied and disputed every allegation the Plaintiffs made, and they fully expected to win in Court. The pandemic, however, interfered with and delayed their day in Court – the Plaintiffs’ lawsuit was almost two years old and getting older.

Champing at the bit for their day in Court, Ms. Vela and Mr. Garcia faced a choice: wait more months, perhaps even more years, spending more money to win? Or settle the lawsuit now, once and for all? They decided it was in their best interests to agree to an out of Court settlement to put this baseless lawsuit behind them.

In order to get paid, the Plaintiffs were only too eager to admit that Ms. Vela and Mr. Garcia broke no law, to admit that Ms. Vela and Mr. Garcia categorically denied and disputed their allegations, to admit that Ms. Vela and Mr. Garcia never admitted to any wrongdoing or violations of law, and to admit that no Court ever found that Ms. Vela and Mr. Garcia violated any state or federal law – which is why neither Ms. Vela nor Mr. Garcia ever personally paid one penny to the Plaintiffs. Ms. Vela and Mr. Garcia can walk away confidently knowing that the Court dismissed the Plaintiffs’ lawsuit without ever making any ruling that they violated the law.

— Mark Anthony Sanchez, Attorney

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dillon Collier

Emmy-award winning reporter Dillon Collier joined the KSAT 12 Defenders in 2016. Dillon's investigative stories air weeknights on the Nightbeat. He provides restaurant health reports for KSAT's "Behind the Kitchen Door." Dillon is a two-time Houston Press Club Journalist of the Year and a Texas Associated Press Broadcasters Reporter of the Year.

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