



Rick Staly, Sheriff
FLAGLER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE
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NEWS RELEASE

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Undercover Operation Arrests 4 Unlicensed Contractors **Performing Work in Flagler County**

BUNNELL, Fla. — The Flagler County Sheriff's Office arrested four suspects in Palm Coast last week following a multi-phase undercover operation targeting unlicensed contractors.

The operation began in August 2025 following an investigation into numerous complaints submitted to the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, the Flagler County Contractor Licensing Division, and the City of Palm Coast Building Department. Detectives identified 45 unlicensed businesses from these complaints, as well as leads from various social media platforms and online advertisements.

During the initial phase of the investigation, the FCSO General Assignment Unit sent text messages and made hundreds of phone calls, which resulted in 19 unlicensed contractors agreeing to perform work within the operation's timeline. The Real Time Crime Center assisted with identifying these unlicensed contractors.

Detectives met with seven of the 19 contractors at a residence in Palm Coast during the second phase of the operation. Of those seven contractors, four of them — Patrick Branigan, 34, of DeLand, Florida; Thomas Rush, 30, of Palm Coast; Jacob Gayle, 31, of Jacksonville, Florida; and Aristides Chavez Martinez, 68, of Palm Coast — advertised and provided estimates for regulated construction services without a license.

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Patrick Branigan, Thomas Rush, Jacob Gayle, and Aristides Chavez Martinez (Sheriff Perry Hall Inmate Detention Facility mugshots)

During the operation's final phase, detectives arrested the unlicensed contractors when they arrived at the residence. Branigan and Rush were arrested for offering to perform work as unregistered electrical contractors and contracting without a license. They were transported to the Sheriff Perry Hall Inmate Detention Facility, where they were each later released on a \$1,000 bond. Gayle was arrested for contracting without a license. He was transported to the jail and released on a \$500 bond. Chavez Martinez was arrested for offering to perform work as an unregistered electrical contractor. After being booked into the jail, he was determined to be in the country illegally and turned over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

A fifth suspect did not engage in the operation's final phase; however, detectives established probable cause for his arrest and have submitted charges to the State Attorney's Office for review. Two others remained in compliance with Florida law but advertised outside the scope of their licensure. As a result, they will receive citations and cease and desist orders from DBPR.

"These arrests help prevent future victims in our community and send a strong message that unlicensed contracting work will not be tolerated," said Sheriff Rick Staly. "I commend our General Assignment Unit, Special Investigations Unit, PACE Unit, and our partners at DBPR and thank the Flagler County Association of REALTORS®, the Flagler Home Builders Association, and the property owners for helping us stop illegal contracting."

Multiple operation targets had criminal histories. Branigan has been arrested previously for possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony; Rush has previous arrests for possession of marijuana, sale of marijuana within 1,000 feet of a specified area, and carrying a concealed unlicensed firearm; and Chavez Martinez has been previously arrested for grand theft, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, aggravated battery on a law enforcement officer, fraud, burglary with assault or battery, and providing false information to law enforcement.

"The fact that many of these unlicensed contractors have been previously arrested, some with violent offenses, should be a red flag for residents that it is important to always vet who you let perform work on your home," Sheriff Staly added.

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Homeowners and business owners should verify contracting licenses through [DBPR](#), the Flagler County Contractor Licensing Division, or their city before starting any project. Hiring an unlicensed contractor can have major consequences, including losing your property insurance coverage, difficulty selling your home later because of unlicensed or unpermitted work, and liability for injuries or property damage. Anyone who suspects a contractor is unlicensed should file a complaint online through DBPR by visiting www2.myfloridalicense.com/file-a-complaint.

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