

Belinda Hill
First Assistant

Immediate Release
August 27th, 2014

Criminal Justice Center
1201 Franklin, Suite 600
Houston, Texas 77002

Contact

Camille Hepola
Jeff McShan

En Español: Will Mejia
Maritza Antu

W: (713) 755-0122

Harris County District Attorney

Devon Anderson

Retail Store Owners Indicted for Food Stamp Trafficking

Defendants exchanged EBT cards for cash

District Attorney Devon Anderson announced today her push to stop food stamp trafficking in Harris County. Her initiative comes as Allen Nguyen, 37, Loan Lai, 28, Arvind Patel, 55, and Roshni Patel, 27 have all been indicted by Harris County grand juries with food stamp fraud. The 3rd degree felony charges stem from a lengthy and thorough investigation by the DA's Office and the Office of Inspector General (OIG) with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

OIG agents began investigating the individuals after a series of complaints about fraudulent use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the food stamp program. Nguyen and Lai, owners of Danny's NL Seafood Market, and the Patels, owners of C & M Grocers, were all indicted by Harris County grand juries in July and August for their roles in stealing thousands of dollars from the federal government.

On multiple occasions at each store, the owners and the employees were illegally purchasing Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) benefits off of Lone Star cards for cash. If convicted, all four defendants face up to 10 years in prison and up to a \$10,000 fine.

"These criminals not only steal from taxpayers but also from Texans who rely on food stamp benefits to survive," said DA Anderson. "We will continue to work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to make sure those abusing the system are aggressively prosecuted and brought to justice," said DA Anderson.

The SNAP EBT cards were created to provide nutrition for low-income families. Individuals meeting specific eligibility requirements can use food stamp benefits only to buy food.

"The United States Department of Agriculture, Office of Inspector General is dedicated to pursuing entities engaged in SNAP fraud and abuses, and to protect the integrity of this important nutrition program," said Special Agent-in-Charge Mary Lewis of OIG's Southwest Region Investigations Office.

Lai and Nguyen are expected to appear in the 230th District Court on August 29th. The Patels will appear in the 208th District Court in September. Donna Hawkins is the assistant district attorney handling the cases. To report food stamp fraud, call: 1-800-424-9121.

NOTE: DA Anderson will be available at 10:30a.m. on Wednesday at 1201 Franklin St., 6th Floor Houston, Tx 77002. Contact: Camille Hepola (713) 898-7823 for information.