



NEWS RELEASE

Eileen M. Decker

United States Attorney
Central District of California

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Thom Mrozek, Public Affairs Officer

thom.mrozek@usdoj.gov

(213) 894-6947

www.justice.gov/usao-cdca

@CDCANews

22 Named in Federal Cases Alleging Theft of Social Security Benefits

LOS ANGELES – Federal authorities have charged a total of 22 defendants with defrauding the Social Security Administration by illegally receiving cash benefits and causing a cumulative loss of \$2.6 million. Most of the defendants are charged with taking Social Security benefits for relatives after the family members had died and failing to alert the agency that the actual beneficiary had passed away.

Federal grand juries in Los Angeles returned 21 indictments last week, cases that were announced today after one defendant – an employee of the Social Security Administration – was arrested for allegedly diverting benefits to herself.

Those charged last week include the federal government employee, a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy and a San Fernando Valley man who is accused of illegally receiving more than \$400,000.

"Government programs like Social Security provide important benefits to qualified individuals so they can have economic security," said United States Attorney Eileen M. Decker. "We cannot tolerate abuse of the system that provides support to millions of honest Americans, many of whom worked their entire lives to receive Social Security benefits. This series of cases illustrates our commitment to root out abuse and fraud involving social security, and to protect the integrity of an important program aimed at helping senior citizens and the most vulnerable in our society."

All of the defendants are charged with theft of government property, a crime that carries a statutory maximum sentence of five years in federal prison. Some of the defendants are charged with additional offenses, including aggravated identity theft and defrauding the Social Security Administration.

The Social Security Administration employee – Daysi Salazar-Arias, 38, of Thousand Oaks – was arrested this morning by special agents with the Social Security Administration's Office of the Inspector General. Salazar-Arias is named in an eight-count indictment that alleges she diverted benefits to herself and making it appear that the money was going to legitimate beneficiaries, one of whom was deceased. Salazar-Arias is expected to be arraigned on the indictment this afternoon in United States District Court in downtown Los Angeles.

Vicki Lynn Gregory, a sergeant with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, is charged with seven felony counts for allegedly taking her mother's

Widow's Insurance Benefits after she died. According to the indictment, Gregory "intentionally concealed the death of her mother...in order to continue to receive and spend these Widow's Insurance Benefits." Gregory allegedly illegally received approximately \$30,000.

In the case involving the largest alleged loss, Jose Aguinaco Ugalde, 68, of West Hills, is charged with 16 counts, including aggravated identity theft, an offense that carries a mandatory two-year prison sentence. According to the indictment, Ugalde stole Retirement Insurance Benefits that continued to be sent to his father, even though the man had died. Ugalde also allegedly stole spousal benefits that were intended for his ex-stepmother. The two identity theft charges in the indictment allege that Ugalde illegally used a debit card issued to his late father, as well as the signature of his ex-stepmother, in stealing these Social Security benefits.

"The Social Security Administration's Office of the Inspector General is committed to pursuing those who violate the public trust," said Robb Stickley, the Special Agent in Charge of the San Francisco Field Division, which is responsible for Southern California. "We will continue to uphold the integrity of Social Security's benefit programs, which are a lifeline for so many Americans and their families."

The other defendants charged in the grand jury indictments announced today are:

- Ricardo Stephens, 58, of Inglewood, who allegedly illegally received nearly \$350,000;
- Kathryn Kushner, 64, of Oxnard, who is charged with illegally taking \$241,793 from the Social Security Administration;
- Maria Lopez, 59, of Moreno Valley, who illegally received just over \$35,000, according to her indictment;
- Elizabeth White, 54, of the Willowbrook District of Los Angeles, who allegedly caused losses of just over \$100,000;
- Kim Dennise Scovis, 60, of Thousand Oaks, who is charged in a case alleging \$68,048 in losses;
- Mario Panagiotopoulos, 48, of Whelan, who allegedly illegally took \$121,000 from the Social Security Administration;
- Sabina Martinez, 69, of Romoland, whose case involves nearly \$100,000 in alleged losses;
- Katina Dell Lasater, 72, of Temecula, who is charged in an indictment that alleges she caused \$23,636 in losses;
- John Miguel Cervantes, 57, of Oceanside, who allegedly caused losses totaling nearly \$250,000;
- Debra Christine Clark, 47, of Escondido, who is charged with illegally receiving just under \$113,000;
- Teodora Valdez Uribe, 82, currently residing in Mexico, who illegally took just over \$115,000, according to her indictment;
- James Robert Stutte, 40, of Salt Lake City, Utah, who is accused of defrauding the Social Security Administration out of more than \$33,000;

- Gwendolyn Marie Clarrett, 61, of Long Beach, who is charged in an indictment that alleges nearly \$25,000 in losses;
- Gene Shui Wong, 65, of Yucca Valley, who is charged with stealing \$127,361 from the Social Security Administration;
- Judith Catherine Alcala, 66, of Chino Hills, who allegedly caused \$161,580 in losses;
- Taralyn Boucher, 60, of La Quinta, whose case alleges a total of \$111,813 in losses;
- Janet Dial, 58, of Thermal, who is also charged with bank fraud in a case that accuses her of illegally receiving \$137,105; and
- Laura Michelle Dubief, 29 of Los Angeles, and Maria Isabel Bailey, 56, of Gardena, who are together charged in an indictment that alleges they stole \$41,670 in Social Security benefits.

With the exception of Salazar-Arias, who was arrested today, and Uribe, who is in Mexico, the defendants charged in this sweep will be receive summons from the court to appear for arraignments in May.

The Social Security Administration's Office of the Inspector General investigates waste, fraud and abuse in the program. If you suspect that a beneficiary or someone designated to handle their affairs is defrauding the program, you can call the Social Security Fraud Hotline at 1-800-269-0271 (from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Pacific Time) or you can file a report online anytime at:

https://www.ssa.gov/fraudreport/oig/public_fraud_reporting/form.htm

CONTACT: Special Assistant United States Attorney Peter Hardin
General Crimes Section
(213) 894-3314