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# 8 indicted for food stamp fraud: 'Small percentage' abuse system, but cost Alabama millions

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By **Ashley Remkus | aremkus@al.com**

Food stamp fraud suspects

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Morgan County residents Ali Alsamawi, Cherokee Clem, Joshua Priest and Joyce Workman are charged with felony food stamp fraud.

Eight north Alabama residents have been indicted on felony charges in Morgan County after a Department of Human Resources investigation determined they fraudulently used food assistance cards, court records show.

Joyce Workman, 44, of Decatur, Cherokee Clem, 19, of Decatur, Joshua Edward Priest, 26, of Lacey's Spring, and Ali Alsamawi, 40, of Decatur, each are charged with public assistance fraud, a Class C felony that's punishable by up to 10 years in prison. Four other suspects also have been indicted, but their identities are being withheld pending arrest.

Three of the suspects, Workman, Alsamawi and Clem, are accused of having and using multiple food assistance cards, which were provided to them by the other five suspects, according to the indictment.

Alabama's food assistance program for low-income families is called SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and is administered by DHR.

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In Alabama, 383,923 households received more than \$100 million in July, according to the most recent [data available](#).

The fraud reportedly occurred in Morgan County from January 2015 to April 2016, court records show.



"We don't really comment on something that's under prosecution," said the Department's spokesman Barry Spear. "We have a fraud investigation unit to work with local and state agencies when something like this might be going on."

Just through the first 11 months of this fiscal year, DHR has collected more than \$5.7 million due to fraud and administrative error, Spear said. The Department has confirmed 886 fraud claims during that same period, he said.

Spear said the department relies on the public for tips and information about individuals or businesses who may be misusing SNAP benefits.

"You see people complaining about it, but they have to let us know," Spear said. "If we don't know about it, we can't very well investigate it."

To report suspected food assistance fraud, contact your [local DHR office](#) or email [fs@dhr.alabama.gov](mailto:fs@dhr.alabama.gov).



The fraud stemmed from benefits issued in Morgan County.

"The thing a lot of people don't realize is it's not just individuals, but also stores that can be responsible for some of the fraud," Spear said. "If you believe a store is allowing people to purchase items that are not eligible for the program or making cash transactions with SNAP benefits, report it. We can stop a whole lot of fraud by stopping a store -- tens or even hundreds of people."

Earlier this year in Jefferson County, a Bessemer grocery store owner agreed to pay \$5.2 million back to DHR when he pleaded guilty to fraud, money laundering and other charges.

In 2015, law enforcement carried out the biggest food stamp [fraud investigation](#) in Jefferson County's history when 17 people were arrested and multiple other probes were launched.

Spear said it's important for the public to remember that DHR does provide some people with cash cards that can be mistaken for SNAP benefits.

Some households qualify for TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which allows cardholders to withdraw cash to help pay for nonfood items.

"Sometimes people will see someone using the TANF program, which is on the same card as SNAP, and think they are misusing it," Spear said.

For some context, Spear said, "it's a small percentage" of people who abuse the program.

"But, if you suspect something, it's best to let us know," he said. "It's important to us to make sure the benefits go to people who really need those benefits and they are used properly."

Morgan County Assistant District Attorney Jerry Knight said although the cases were presented to a grand jury in the county, the prosecution is being held by DHR's attorney Kimberly Dobbs.

Dobbs didn't respond to a request for comment.

During fiscal year 2015 in Alabama, an average of 417,994 households received SNAP benefits each month, totaling more than \$1.3 billion, DHR reported.

The four suspects who have been arrested were taken by sheriff's deputies to the Morgan County Jail with bail set at \$2,500 each.

Indictments are formal notices of charges filed against defendants after grand juries have determined there is enough evidence to proceed to trial.

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