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NJ COUPLE ADMITS \$4.5M IN FOOD STAMP FRAUD AT THEIR STORE

Erin Vogt | Published: April 10, 2019

paying cash (DjelicS/Getty Images)

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A Passaic County couple faces federal prison after stealing more than \$4.5 million in a food stamps fraud scheme.

Ibrahim Zughbi, 65, and his wife, Miriam Zughbi, 61, of Wayne, pleaded guilty Wednesday in federal court.

The couple exchanged the SNAP benefits for cash between 2014 and 2018 while they owned and worked at Jamaica Meat Market, a grocery store in Paterson.



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The Zughbis would ring up fake purchases, handing over cash to a SNAP account holder while pocketing more than 30% of the proceeds, according to federal court documents.

It is illegal to exchange food stamps for cash.

Federal prosecutors said Ibrahim Zughbi already was barred from taking part in the SNAP program for the same illegal activity at a store he had previously owned. He got around his restriction by putting another person down as owner of the Jamaica Meat Market, according to U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito.

An informant working with law enforcement helped document the scam by making 16 phony purchases at the store in exchange for cash, Carpenito said.

Ibrahim Zughbi pleaded guilty to SNAP benefit fraud and money laundering and faces up to 40 years in prison and a hefty fine.

Miriam Zughbi pleaded guilty to conspiracy to defraud the U.S. through SNAP benefit fraud and faces up to five years in prison and a hefty fine.

Sentencing for both is scheduled for July 17.

Fraud of this kind is not uncommon in New Jersey. In 2017, an Elizabeth store owner was sentenced to two years in federal prison after stealing more than \$1.1 million in food stamps.

Last year, feds accused a family that ran a grocery store in Newark of exchanging more than \$5 million in SNAP benefits for cash.

And earlier this year, a woman admitted working with her father at their Newark deli to exchange more than \$885,000 in SNAP benefits for cash between 2011 and 2018.

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