

The Enterprise

The Enterprise

Illegal food stamp transactions

Alex Bloom

Published 11:01 p.m. ET Nov. 8, 2012 | Updated 8:17 a.m. ET Nov. 9, 2012

Investigators didn't have to look far for evidence of illegal activity when they got to the JP Communications store with search and arrest warrants on Thursday.

Store clerk Marie Pierre, cash in one hand and a customer's electronic "food stamps" card in the other, was right in the middle of an illegal transaction, authorities say.

Pierre and seven other owners and clerks of Brockton convenience stores were arrested and charged in connection with a fraudulent use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, known commonly as "food stamps," after a six-month undercover investigation.

The stores involved and charged with trafficking food stamps were 28 Corner Convenience (B&D Mart), 95 Montello St.; JP Communications, 69 North Montello St.; Lucky Dollar, 284 North Main St.; Rice's Market, 769 North Main St.; and Dip N Sip, 235 North Main St.

The investigation found the store owners and clerks were engaging in a scheme that involved illegally exchanging food stamps for cash, according to the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office.

On several occasions since May, undercover officers would go into the stores and present electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards to the clerk. The clerk would swipe the customer's card, pretending the customer bought groceries and then give them cash, said authorities.

For example, if the EBT customer wanted \$50 cash, the store owner would swipe the card for \$100, which would be credited to the store, and then give the customer the cash in exchange.

Another scheme involved store owners buying groceries with a customer's EBT card at a discount store, like BJ's, and then selling that food at their store in exchange for the cash, said authorities.

In one instance an undercover officer noticed frozen sausages bought with his card being sold in the refrigerator at one of the stores the next day.

The Enterprise

A bill signed by Gov. Deval Patrick in July restricts the use of EBT cards in purchasing alcohol, tobacco, Lottery tickets, jewelry, manicures and at liquor stores, casinos, strip clubs, adult bookstores or adult paraphernalia shops, firearms and ammunitions dealers, tattoo parlors, spas, bars and drinking establishments and cruise ships.

State police detectives assigned to the district attorney's office in conjunction with the Brockton police and state police gang unit conducted the sting starting in May.

The eight clerks arrested were arraigned Thursday and held on cash bail ranging from \$500 to \$25,000. All eight were required to surrender their passports.

The investigation is still ongoing and at least one arrest warrant remained open Thursday, said DA spokeswoman Bridget Norton Middleton.

While the clerks were arrested and charged, the district attorney has no authority to force the stores to close or take away their authorization as an EBT location, said Middleton.

The state Executive Office of Health and Human Services, which runs the EBT program, did not respond to requests for comment on Thursday regarding how the stores would be handled.

An Enterprise staff member found that all five stores involved were closed Thursday afternoon.

A Quincy store owner and 21 others were arrested in connection with a similar scheme in April. The Quincy store, Pat's Mini Mart, was found to be operating a cash-for-food stamps exchange by the Attorney General's office.

The Attorney General's office said at the time that Pat's Mini Mart has been transacting about \$70,000 per month in mostly fraudulent sales.

It is estimated that owner's cut each month resulted in roughly \$30,000.

Authorities could not say what tipped them off to the scheme in Brockton and what spurred the undercover investigation. They do not believe that the stores were working together on the scheme.

The Enterprise
