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DHS arrests several in welfare fraud sweep

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An investigator with the Mississippi Department of Human Services and Lauderdale County Sheriff's Department Dep. morning. Hill was arrested on a warrant from the state agency alleging she defrauded the state's welfare program. Sev part of the DHS sweep.

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Inside a conference room at the Lauderdale County Department of Human Services on Valley Street in Meridian, Ken Palmer met with three of his investigators with the Mississippi State Department of Human Services to go over a list of names.

Palmer, the director of Fraud Investigations, Division of Program Integrity with DHS, wanted to make sure all the information on the people suspected of defrauding the state's welfare program were up to date and correct. A few moments later, three deputies with the Lauderdale County Sheriff's Department walked through the conference room door. The deputies were matched up with investigators making up three teams that would quickly move through Meridian and Lauderdale County searching for, and then arresting those on the list.

As soon as the officers and investigators were assigned the names of those on the arrest warrants and where they may be found, the three teams split up.

"SNAP is designed to help low-income people make food purchases for their families," Palmer said. "SNAP fraud, however, hurts everyone. Local stores where purchases would have been made suffer a loss of revenue and, of course, the family suffers because they are disqualified from a program which would have allowed for appropriate food purchases."

The Mississippi Department of Human Services investigators were in Meridian to assist local law enforcement in making the arrests of individuals who are accused of defrauding the welfare program, specifically SNAP (food stamps).

The SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) provides a way for low-income families and individuals to buy nourishing food that they would not otherwise be able to afford. In 2008, SNAP took the place of the older food stamp program.

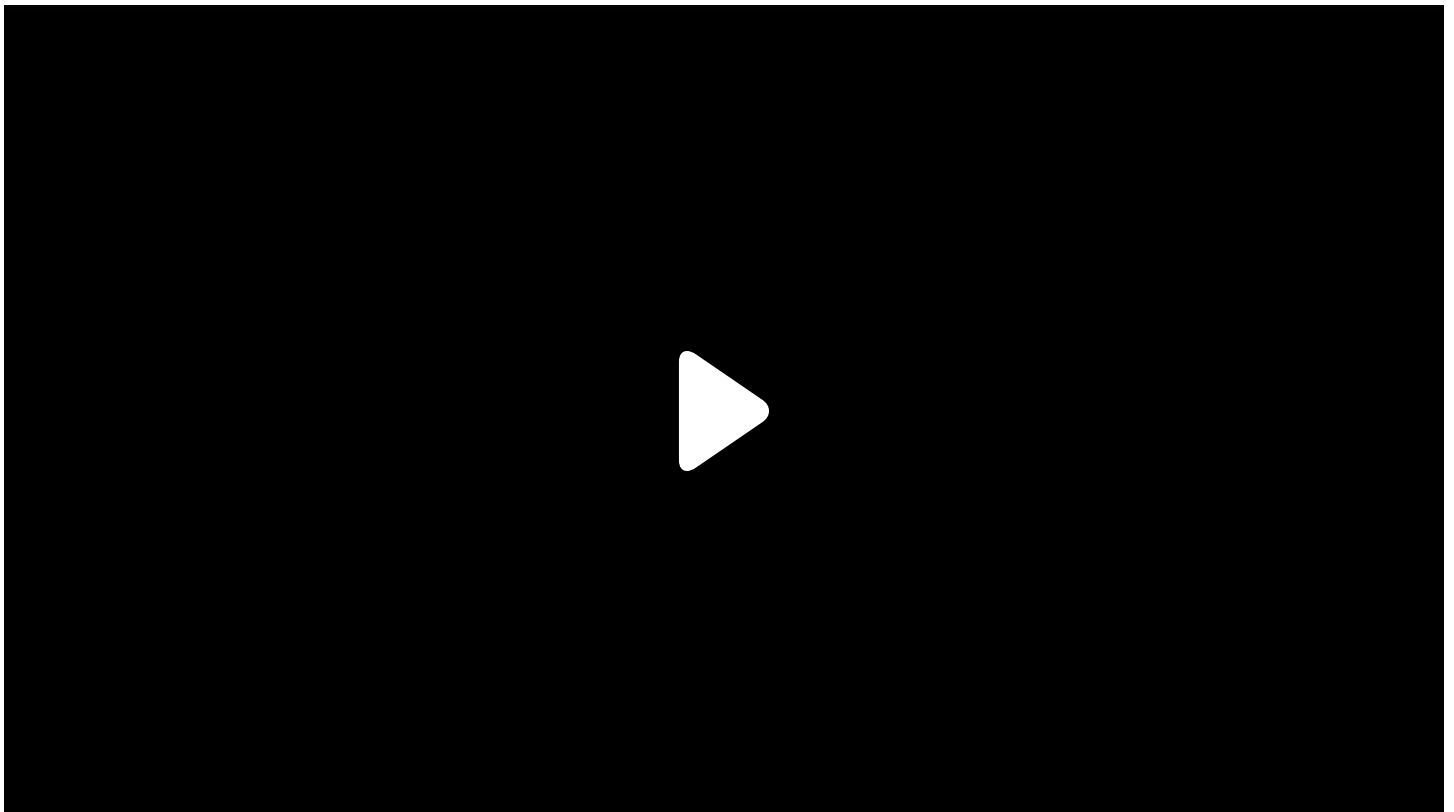
According to a press release issued through the office of Julia Bryan, public information officer for DHS, SNAP fraud is usually the result of a client withholding income or household information that could deem them ineligible to receive benefits.

Disqualification periods for SNAP fraud can range from 12 months for the first violation to permanent disqualification. Ineligibility is determined by state and federal mandates and can be ordered by the courts as part of sentencing.

According to the release, 22.5 percent of Mississippians are enrolled in SNAP. Almost 30 percent of Lauderdale County residents are enrolled in the program.

The eight people taken into custody Friday were processed through the Lauderdale County Adult Detention Facility in downtown Meridian. Those arrested were, Tara L. Lewis, 36, Nicole Clearman, 36, Stephanie Gordon, 37, Stacy L. Hill, 48, Stephanie M. Bynum, 39, T. Vanessa Campbell, 45, Janey L. Overstreet, and Amanda M. Weems, 29.

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