

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

What \$20 million in alleged food stamp fraud bought these 12 people: prosecution

BY DAVID J. NEAL

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The Justice Department charged 12 South Floridians with fraud after, prosecutors allege, they ripped off \$20 million through a basic food stamp fraud scheme run out of stores in Miami and Broward counties. AL DIAZ *Miami Herald* File



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South Florida reached another fraud milestone for what the Justice Department called “the largest combined financial fraud loss for a food stamp trafficking takedown in history.”

That dubious new record, federal prosecutors claim, is \$20 million and resulted in a dozen charged with doing the government dirty via food stamp fraud, wire fraud

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and conspiracy to commit wire fraud.

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The 12 charged over four cases are Hasan Saleh, 59, Mohammed Alobaisi, 37, Reynold Francois, 38, Ihab Hassouna, 44, Mohammad Alteen, 33, Maria Jerdana, 36, Joe Ann Baker, 56, Yousef “Joe” Homedan Zahran, 60, Omar Hajje, 43, Jalal Hajyousef, 42, Andy Javier Herrera, 24, and father Javier Herrera, 49.

“In this instance, eight small convenience stores in South Florida committed a staggering amount of fraud in a relatively short amount of time,” said Karen Citizen-Wilcox, special agent in charge, U.S. Department of Agriculture-Office of the Inspector General, in a release. “These retailers created an illegal benefits exchange system that defrauded the American taxpayer and denied healthy foods to needy children and their families. The store owners who allegedly orchestrated this trafficking scheme pocketed millions in ‘fees’ which they charged for converting food assistance benefits into cash.”

Some of the defendants owned, worked at or operated stores authorized to accept Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program payments, known as SNAP. Others worked at stores not authorized, but allegedly used the point-of-sale terminals for stores that were authorized.

The fraud happened like this, according to authorities: A store clerk swipes a person's electronic benefits card at a point-of-sale terminal for a large amount. The person with the card is paid a lesser amount in cash. The remainder is ill-gotten profit for the store owner.

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The bust from Operation Stampede/Cash Hungry in Florida involved more than \$13 million in

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which wasn't authorized to take such payments. Prosecutors say such and such Four Corners employees used the point-of-sale terminals at Liberty City's Sparkle, 6530 NW 18th Ave., run by Alobaisi. Prosecutors say that from April 2015 through this past August, Saleh, Alobaisi and employees Francois, Hassouna, Alteen, Jerdana and Baker stole \$2 million with the scheme.

Case No. 2 involved Zahran, also known as Youssef Hussein, who worked at Pompano Beach's Community Food Store, 401 NW 27th Ave. He is being accused of being on the fraud train a relatively short time, Nov. 3, 2016, through Jan. 11.

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Hajje and Hajyousef owned Steve Market 2 and Yum-Yum's grocery, stores across the street from each other at 6804 NW 15th Ave. and 6813 NW 15th Ave. in Miami's Liberty City neighborhood. They allegedly fraudulently acquired \$4.2 million.

But federal prosecutors give the money title, \$10 million, to the Herreras, who also allegedly ran their game longer than everyone else — April 2012 through last month. Andy owned Santa Ana Market II, 1832 NW 17th Ave. in Miami. Father Javier worked there and Santa Ana Market, 3000 NW 12th Ave. Javier has convictions for third-degree grand theft and lottery violations on his rap sheet.

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