

18 ARRESTED IN SCAM ON IMMIGRANT DOCUMENTS

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Byline: JUSTIN GEORGE, Times Staff Writer

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Highlight: Officials say they've just scratched surface.

Body

The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office began noticing two things in September 2006: A rash of hit-and-run accidents, and businesses boldly advertising to undocumented immigrants.

"Do you need to obtain a tag or title for your car or truck?" one flier said. "We can do it with a license from Mexico or any other country, a voter's registration, a consulate ID, an international DL, or any official ID."

The businesses weren't lying. Investigators learned they gave undocumented immigrants fake driver's licenses, Social Security cards, insurance cards or other licenses, which the companies handed to the Hillsborough County Tax Collector's Office in exchange for authentic titles and vehicle registrations.

And the Tax Collector's Office couldn't be blamed, detectives found, because state guidelines limit clerks from checking IDs - exposing a loophole the sheriff says only legislation can fix.

Thursday, the Sheriff's Office, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U.S. Attorney's Office announced the arrests of 18 people, including seven representatives of auto sales or title companies, who face various state fraud charges as part of a scam. Others were charged with driving without a valid driver's license or giving false names to law enforcement.

The U.S. Attorney's Office indicted seven other suspects who worked in two more title companies on federal fraud charges, which can carry a maximum sentence of five years.

Two cars have been impounded and investigators say they have just scratched the surface of the ploy. They don't know how long the scheme has been running but they expect more arrests.

Two suspects named Thursday remain on the loose.

Many of the title companies raided by the Sheriff's Office billed themselves as legitimate government agencies or partners, Sheriff David Gee said. The companies charged immigrants \$500 for services, which is three times the amount title companies charge to assemble title and registration applications.

Most disturbing, Gee said, was the discovery that county tax collectors have no way to determine valid driver's licenses or insurance cards from fake ones when people apply for title and registration.

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Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden and his director of branch operations, Dale Hoffman, said the state doesn't require tax collectors to check driver's licenses in title applications. The state wants counties to make sure paperwork is in order and send it on to the state. Driver's licenses don't have to be physically shown at front counters. Photocopies are fine, Hoffman said.

There's no way to check insurance policy numbers in applications either, Hoffman said.

The same holds true in every Florida county, said Pasco County Tax Collector Mike Olson.

Sam McClelland, Pinellas County office spokesman, said his office screens applications for foreign ID cards or certificates, which they can flag to the state for further scrutiny.

But it's up to the Legislature to give tax collectors access to databases or machines to verify driver's licenses, tax officials said.

Whether that's a good thing is debatable, Olson said, as it could slow down an already busy system.

Justin George can be reached at jgeorge@sptimes.com or (813) 226-3368.

FAST FACTS

Those **arrested**

The following are charged with offenses involving vehicle identification numbers, applications, certificates and papers; uttering a forced instrument; false or fraudulent motor vehicle insurance application.

Inter Car and Truck Sales, 15532 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Dover: Jose Tavarez, 40, of Lithia; Tirsia Acosta-Fernandez, 38, of Lithia; Esmeralda Garcia, 33, of Brandon.

Jimaguas Auto Sales, 3160 State Road 60 E, Valrico: Orlando Reyes, 35, of Valrico; Luisa Hernandez-Guzman, 29, of Valrico.

The following face federal charges of fraud and misuse of **documents**, visa or other permits; fraud and related activity in connection with identification **documents** or Social Security cards.

April Lopez Title Co., 517 U.S. 41 S, Ruskin: Gwendolyn Housekeeper, 38, of Ruskin; Marisol Lopez-Flores, 25; Jose Tejada, 23, who is already in federal custody; Camilo Garcia-Rodriguez, 32, also in federal custody.

Julia Garcia Title Co., 5466 State Road 674, Wimauma: Julia Garcia, 33, of Ruskin; Casimiro Garcia, 48, of Ruskin; Ananias Velasquez-Velasquez, 24, of Palmetto.

Graphic

PHOTO, CARRIE PRATT, Times: Sheriff's Col. Gary Terry, right, talks with Mike Kennedy of Immigration Customs Enforcement before a news conference. (Ran Tampa & State)

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