



Department of Investigation

Press Release

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**7 INDIVIDUALS
- INCLUDING A U.S. MAIL CARRIER & 2 MANHATTAN BODEGA OWNERS -
CHARGED IN THEFT OF 5,000 NYCHA RENT CHECKS TOTALING \$450,000**

FRIDAY, JUNE 25, 1999 -- EDWARD J. KURIANSKY, Commissioner of the Department of Investigation (DOI), today announced the arrest on federal charges of seven (7) individuals -- including a U.S. mail carrier, 2 Manhattan bodega owners, and 4 others -- for their participation in the theft of 5,000 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) rental checks, having a total face value of approximately \$450,000. Four (4) of the defendants have already pleaded guilty.

In August 1997, NYCHA reported to DOI that a large number of rental checks mailed to 5 housing developments in the Bronx had never arrived. The checks had been issued by the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA) and sent directly to the 5 NYCHA management offices to pay the rent of low-income tenants on public assistance. All 5 management offices are located in the same 10456 Bronx zip code. Ultimately, it was determined that approximately 5,000 NYCHA rental checks, totaling approximately \$450,000, had been stolen between June 1997 and April 1998, and that all of the missing checks had passed through the Morrisania Post Office and the Bronx General Post Office. As a result, NYCHA temporarily ceased mailing rental checks to the 5 Bronx housing developments.

An investigation conducted jointly by DOI, the City's Human Resources Administration's Bureau of Fraud Investigation (BFI), and the United States Postal Inspection Service determined that a majority of the checks had been cashed by approximately 60 wholesale food and beverage distributors who service bodegas in Manhattan. In questioning delivery personnel for the distributors, investigators learned that deliverers occasionally collected third-party checks from bodegas as payment for goods sold to the stores. To keep track of who was paying by third-party check, deliverers would make notations on the back of the checks -- such as the name of the store, its address, and the name of the person at the store who provided the check. As a result, the investigation came to focus on 3 small upper Manhattan bodegas -- the R.C. Deli, located at 1030 Amsterdam Avenue; Yariel Grocery, located at 1626 Park Avenue; and Infante Market, located at 73 St. Nicholas Place -- whose addresses appeared on the back of many of the missing checks.

As part of the investigation, a BFI undercover agent went to each of the three bodegas on March 12, 1998, and offered to sell NYCHA rental checks for a discount. FABIO URENA, at R.C. Deli, and PEDRO ("CHI") GARCIA, at Infante Market, each purchased checks for approximately 30% of their face value. GARCIA also told the undercover agent that he could give him a better rate if the undercover brought him more checks. Eight days later, a second undercover, also wearing a wire, went to Infante Market and approached FRANCISCO INFANTE, who was behind the counter, and again offered to sell NYCHA rental checks at a discount. INFANTE told the undercover he could not take any checks just then and told the undercover to go to Yariel Grocery and ask for "Jose," indicating that Jose would also purchase NYCHA checks for 30% of their value.

On March 24, 1998, the first undercover returned to Infante Market, met again with PEDRO GARCIA, and offered to sell 6 more NYCHA rental checks. During their conversation, GARCIA stated that he received "stacks" of Housing Authority checks from another source (who was known as "Antonio" and drove a white Honda station wagon), and that if the undercover would also bring him stacks of rental checks, he would give the undercover more money.

In furtherance of the investigation, on April 3, 1998, approximately 150 NYCHA rental checks addressed to 3 of the housing developments were placed in the "mail stream" by a supervisor at the Morrisania Post Office. During the course of this controlled delivery, a white Honda station wagon containing 3 men -- DARRYL ("ANTONIO") STUKES, IRVING ("BLACKIE") CODRINGTON, and ROBERT "COPE") COPNEY -- was observed parked opposite the Infante bodega. Shortly thereafter, the men were observed entering and leaving the bodega. STUKES, CODRINGTON, and COPNEY were arrested by postal inspectors as they exited the store and returned to their car. During a search of the car, a bag containing some of the NYCHA "control" checks that earlier had been put into the mail stream were discovered. STUKES admitted that he had received the checks earlier that day from DARRYL ("SMOKEY") BELLAMY, a postal employee at the Morrisania Post Office.

Later that day, DOI and other law enforcement agents observed as STUKES met with BELLAMY on the corner of 167th Street and Webster Avenue and exchanged rental checks and cash. BELLAMY was placed under arrest and approximately 21 additional rental checks and \$300 in cash were discovered on him.

DARRYL BELLAMY, 40, of the Bronx, was arrested on April 3, 1998, and charged with one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States under Title 18, U.S. Code, §371. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy (18 USC §371) and theft of mail (18 USC §1708) and was sentenced to 21 months in federal prison, 3 years' supervised release, and ordered to make restitution of \$467,091. BELLAMY was a United States postal mail carrier from May 1988 until his termination shortly after his arrest.

IRVING CODRINGTON, 39, of Manhattan, was arrested on April 3, 1998, and charged with one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States (18 USC §371). He pleaded guilty to conspiracy (18 USC §371), theft of mail (18 USC §1708), and possessing forged securities (18 USC §513) and was sentenced to 4 months in prison, 3 years' supervised release, and ordered to make restitution of \$15,000.

ROBERT LEWIS COPNEY, 53, of Manhattan, was arrested on April 3, 1998, and charged with one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States (18 USC §371). He pleaded guilty to conspiracy (18 USC §371), theft of mail (18 USC §1708), and possessing forged securities (18 USC §513), and is awaiting sentence.

DARRYL STUKES, 40, of the Bronx, was arrested on April 3, 1998, and charged with one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States (18 USC §371). He pleaded guilty to conspiracy (18 USC §371), theft of mail (18 USC §1708), and possessing forged securities (18 USC §513), and was sentenced to 30 months in prison, 3 years' supervised release, and ordered to make restitution of \$471,091.

PEDRO GARCIA, 30, of Manhattan, was arrested on June 21, 1999, and charged with one count of possessing forged securities (18 USC §513). GARCIA is employed at the Infante Market, located at 73 St. Nicholas Place in Manhattan.

FABIO URENA, 41, of Manhattan, was arrested on June 21, 1999, and charged with one count of possessing forged securities (18 USC §513). URENA is the owner of both the R.C. Deli, located at 1030 Amsterdam Avenue, and Yariel Grocery, located at 1626 Park Avenue.

FRANCISCO INFANTE, 49, of the Bronx, was arrested on June 21, 1999, and charged with one count of possessing forged securities (18 USC §513). He is believed to be the owner of the Infante Market, located at 73 St. Nicholas Place in Manhattan.

Commissioner Kuriansky expressed his sincere appreciation to HRA and NYCHA for their assistance and cooperation throughout the investigation.

The investigation was conducted by DOI Assistant Commissioner and NYCHA Inspector General (IG) Steven A. Pasichow and members of his staff, including Assistant IG Irene Serrapica, Special Investigator Maia Wade, and Investigative Auditor April Mastrangelo. Additional assistance was provided by DOI's Technical Services Unit.

The investigation was also conducted by Peter Jenik, Director of HRA's Bureau of Fraud Investigations, and members of his staff, including Deputy Director Harry Guglielmo and Fraud Investigator Sandra Barclay. Postal Inspector Andre Esannason of the U.S. Postal Service also participated in the investigation.

The Office of Mary Jo White, United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, is prosecuting the cases. Assistant United States Attorney Cheryl A. Krause handled the four April 3, 1998, cases, and Assistant United States Attorney Tiffany M. Erwin is handling the three June 21, 1999, arrests.