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**DOI ARRESTS SIX FIRE DEPARTMENT JOB APPLICANTS FOR
ALLEGEDLY SUBMITTING PHONY EDUCATIONAL DEGREES**

--Two arrests occurred Thursday and the remaining individuals were arrested in June and September 2007--

ROSE GILL HEARN, Commissioner of the Department of Investigation (DOI), announced the arrests of six individuals for allegedly submitting fake high school equivalency certificates and college associate degrees and a phony high school diploma to land jobs at the New York City Fire Department (FDNY). The candidates were trying to earn positions as Firefighters, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and as a Clerical Associate.

These arrests are part of an ongoing DOI investigation into the submission of fake educational degrees. In January 2007, DOI issued a Report that found 14 FDNY members submitted bogus degrees trying to earn promotions or appointments. As a result of the DOI Report, the FDNY meted out approximately \$135,000 in disciplinary fines against the 14 FDNY members. In addition, the FDNY improved its degree verification procedures. Subsequently, the FDNY's Candidate Investigation Division became suspicious of the degrees submitted by these six individuals and referred the cases to DOI.

As part of the investigation, a DOI undercover investigator went online seeking to purchase a college degree from a website called "Belford University." The DOI investigator took an "entry exam," failed, was encouraged by the entity's website to take the exam again and then the investigator even received the answers to the exam from the website. The DOI investigator then successfully passed the online exam and obtained a "bachelor's degree in Aerospace Engineering." The investigator paid \$509.15 for the "degree." The price included an extra cost for graduating "summa cum laude," and also included a 15 percent "discount" that was described as a "scholarship" for completing the transaction on the phone, with a credit card. The investigator took no classes to receive the so-called "degree" and received graduation documentation 15 days after taking the exam. The graduation documentation included a "degree," a "transcript" with grades and classes and an "award of excellence" for the investigator's work on an aerospace engineering project, even though the investigator never performed any work on such a project. In addition, the DOI investigator intentionally submitted a birth date that indicated the investigator would have been 12 years old at the time of "graduation." In selecting a "major" for his "degree," the DOI investigator stated he wished to purchase an Aerospace Engineering degree because, he stated on the application, "I luv planes and rockets."

DOI Commissioner Rose Gill Hearn said, "These arrests are the tangible result of the diligence of DOI's investigators and the improved procedures the FDNY has established to catch individuals trying to scam degree requirements. DOI and the FDNY have remained vigilant on this issue and the two agencies continue to work together to ensure the degree verification process remains consistent and fair for those individuals who work

hard to get their educational requirements honestly. I commend the FDNY for improving their procedures leading to the detection of these cases.”

In June 2007, DOI arrested NICHOLAS MESSINA, who was charged with Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the First Degree, a class E felony. In addition, he was charged with Falsifying Business Records in the Second Degree; Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the Second Degree and Official Misconduct, which are each class A misdemeanors. If convicted, he faces up to four years in prison.

In September 2007, DOI arrested MARTIN BURCH, SAMUEL MILLER-VAUGHN and MAYRA JIMENEZ. Each was charged with Tampering with Public Records in the First Degree, a class D felony and Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the First Degree, a class E felony. In addition, each was charged with Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the Second Degree and Falsifying Business Records in the Second Degree, which are both class A misdemeanors. If convicted, each faces up to seven years in prison.

On Thursday, October 11, 2007, DOI arrested TYEASHA MCGRUFF and SHAQUANNA MOYE. Each was arrested on charges of Tampering with Public Records in the First Degree and Criminal Possession of a Forged Instrument in the Second Degree, which are both class D felonies; and Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the First Degree, a class E felony. In addition, each was charged with Criminal Possession of a Forged Instrument in the Third Degree, Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the Second Degree and Falsifying Business Records in the Second Degree, which are each class A misdemeanors. If convicted, each faces up to seven years in prison.

The DOI investigation found the so-called high school equivalency “certificates” submitted by candidates did not include security features found on genuine New York State high school equivalency certificates. In addition, the New York State Education Department did not have a record of the individuals obtaining the certificates.

The DOI investigation also found that two job applicants allegedly submitted phony degrees from “Belford University,” the entity from which a DOI investigator purchased an Aerospace Engineering degree and is not a legitimately accredited academic institution.

DOI’s investigation culminated in the following arrests:

- BURCH, 33, of Lawrenceville, N.J. allegedly submitted an Associate’s Degree in Fire Science from “Belford University” for the position of Firefighter in the FDNY. DOI’s investigation found that BURCH did not take any courses, nor did he earn the 70 credits he stated on FDNY documents.
- JIMENEZ, 28, of Brooklyn, N.Y., allegedly submitted a fraudulent New York State Education Department high school equivalency certificate to the FDNY Candidate Investigation Division, and also allegedly falsified application documents when applying for the position of Clerical Associate with the FDNY. A DOI investigation found that JIMENEZ did not receive a high school equivalency certificate from a New York State school.
- MCGRUFF, 29, of the Bronx, allegedly submitted a fraudulent New York State Education Department high school equivalency certificate to the FDNY Candidate Investigation Division and allegedly falsified application documents when applying for the position of EMT with the FDNY Bureau of Emergency Medical Services (EMS). A DOI investigation found MCGRUFF did not receive a high school equivalency diploma from a New York State School.
- MESSINA, 23, of Copiague, N.Y., allegedly submitted an Associate’s Degree in Fire Science from “Belford University” to become a Firefighter with the FDNY. DOI’s investigation found MESSINA did not complete

any coursework, nor did he receive the grades as he stated on documents submitted to the FDNY. Messina was already an EMT with the FDNY when he applied to become a firefighter.

- MILLER-VAUGHN, 25, of Manhattan, N.Y., allegedly submitted a fraudulent high school diploma and allegedly falsified application documents when applying for the position of EMT with the FDNY Bureau of Emergency Medical Services (EMS). In documents Miller-Vaughn allegedly submitted to the FDNY, he indicated his degree was issued by “Jefferson High School” in Manhattan, but the DOI investigation found no high school exists by that name in New York City and that Miller-Vaughn did not receive a high school diploma from a New York State school.

- MOYE, 29, of the Bronx, allegedly submitted a fraudulent New York State Education Department high school equivalency certificate to the FDNY Candidate Investigation Division, and allegedly falsified application documents when applying for the position of EMT with the FDNY Bureau of Emergency Medical Services (EMS). A DOI investigation found that MOYE did not receive a high school equivalency diploma from a New York State School.

Commissioner Gill Hearn thanked FDNY Commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta for his and his staff’s assistance and cooperation in this case.

This investigation was conducted by DOI’s Office of the Inspector General for the FDNY.

The Office of Kings County District Attorney Charles J. Hynes is prosecuting the case.

Criminal complaints are accusations. Defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

DOI is one of the oldest law-enforcement agencies in the country. The agency investigates and refers for prosecution City employees and contractors engaged in corrupt or fraudulent activities or unethical conduct. Investigations may involve any agency, officer, elected official or employee of the City, as well as those who do business with or receive benefits from the City.

**Get the worms out of the Big Apple.
To report someone ripping off the City, call DOI at (212) 825-5959.**