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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, February 20, 2019

Essex County, New Jersey Woman Sentenced to Two Years in Prison for Illegal Food Stamps Scheme

NEWARK, N.J. – An Essex County, New Jersey, woman was sentenced today to 24 months in prison for her role in a food stamps fraud scheme, U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito announced.

Maria Teresa Venegas of Newark previously pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge John Michael Vazquez to an information charging her with one count of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit fraud. Judge Vazquez imposed the sentence today in Newark federal court.

According to documents filed in this case and statements made in court:

Venegas was the listed owner of Jenny's Deli, a small grocery store in Newark. From March 2015 to March 2018, her father, Manuel Venegas, was an employee of Jenny's Deli.

Jenny's Deli was authorized to accept benefits provided by SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. The program is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retail food stores approved for participation in SNAP may sell food in exchange for SNAP benefits but may not exchange SNAP benefits for cash. According to the charges against them, Maria Teresa Venegas and Manuel Venegas exchanged more than \$885,000 in SNAP benefits for cash between 2011 and 2018.

Every SNAP recipient receives an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, similar to a debit card, to use to make purchases. Every retailer authorized to accept SNAP benefits has an EBT terminal. Food purchases are made by swiping the card at the



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terminal. After the customer enters a Personal Identification Number (PIN), the EBT terminal verifies the PIN, determines whether the customer's account balance is sufficient to cover the proposed transaction, and informs the retailer whether the transaction should be authorized or denied. The amount of the purchase is deducted electronically from the SNAP benefits reserved for the customer and the purchase amount is credited to the retailer's designated bank account.

In addition to the high volume of SNAP benefits redemptions for Jenny's Deli, indicating fraud, law enforcement agents verified the fraudulent exchange of SNAP benefits for cash through the use of an undercover law enforcement agent who engaged in approximately 20 "purchases" at Jenny's Deli where Manuel Venegas, Maria Teresa Venegas, or another Jenny's Deli employee acting at their direction exchanged money for SNAP benefits.

In addition to the prison term, Judge Vazquez sentenced Maria Teresa Venegas to two years of supervised release and ordered restitution of \$888,487.

Manuel Venegas pleaded guilty on Oct. 30, 2018, to the same charge and is scheduled to be sentenced March 6, 2019.

U.S. Attorney Carpenito credited special agents of the U.S. Department of Agriculture – Office of Inspector General, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Bethanne M. Dinkins, with the investigation leading to today's sentencing.

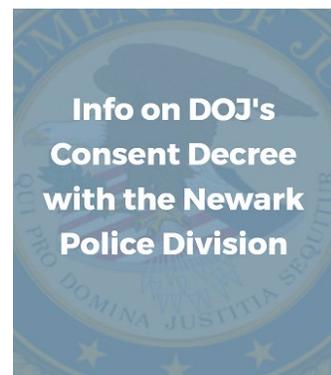
The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason S. Gould of the U.S. Attorney's Office Criminal Division in Newark.

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