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Monday, April 17, 2017

Waterbury Grocery Store Worker Pleads Guilty to Defrauding Federal Food Stamp Program

Deirdre M. Daly, United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, announced that TAHIR SHAHZAD, 33, of Harrison, New York, waived his right to be indicted and pleaded guilty today in Hartford federal court to one count of unlawful use of food stamp benefits and one count of conspiracy to commit food stamp fraud.

The federal Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program ("SNAP") is administered by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service and utilizes federal tax dollars to subsidize low-income households to provide them with the opportunity to achieve a more nutritious diet by increasing their food-purchasing power. SNAP recipients purchase eligible food items at retail food stores through the use of an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, and SNAP benefits may be accepted by authorized retailers only in exchange for eligible items. Items such as alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, paper goods and soaps are not eligible for purchase with Food Stamp benefits, and it is a violation of the rules and regulations governing the food stamp program to allow benefits to be used to purchase ineligible items. SNAP benefits may not lawfully be exchanged for cash under any circumstances. The program is designed so that the total amount of each purchase is electronically transferred to the retailer's designated bank account.

According to court documents and statements made in court, SHAHZAD worked at WB Trade Fair Grocery, located at 43 Willow Street in Waterbury. SHAHZAD was the nephew of the store owner and at times acted as the store manager, supervising at least four other individuals who worked at the store. From November 2014 until June 2016, SHAHZAD and others illegally allowed customers to redeem their food stamp benefits for cash and other ineligible items, including cigarettes, glass pipes, bongos, and hookahs. SHAHZAD charged the customers' food stamp cards approximately



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double the value for these illegal transactions.

Given the stock of eligible food items at the store, the number of registers and the customer amenities, it is estimated that WB Trade Fair Grocery could lawfully redeem at most between \$120,000 to \$240,000 per year in food stamp benefits. However, during this approximately 18-month period, food stamp redemptions at the store totaled approximately \$3.2 million.

SHAHZAD is scheduled to be sentenced by U.S. District Judge Vanessa L. Bryant on July 13, 2017, at which time he faces a maximum term of imprisonment of 10 years, a fine of up to twice the gross loss from the offense, and restitution. He is released on a \$50,000 bond.

Two men who worked at WB Trade Fair Grocery previously pleaded guilty to the same charges. Raul Carlos Monarca-Gonzalez pleaded guilty on November 28, 2016. On April 7, 2017, he was sentenced to 30 months of imprisonment. Tallat Mahmood pleaded guilty on March 30, 2017, and is scheduled to be sentenced on July 12, 2017.

This matter has been investigated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Inspector General, and is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Anastasia King and Neeraj Patel.

Component(s):

USAO - Connecticut

Updated April 17, 2017

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