



News Releases

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Chattanooga, TN

6 indicted for conspiring to purchase and issue unlawful Tennessee driver's licenses

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. - A federal grand jury in Chattanooga returned a two-count indictment on Tuesday against six individuals, including one Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) employee, for conspiring to unlawfully produce Tennessee driver's licenses.

The indictments are a result of investigation conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Tennessee Highway Patrol, Criminal Investigation Division (THPCID), the U.S. Secret Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI).

"Document and benefit fraud poses a significant vulnerability that must not go unchallenged," said Raymond R. Parmer, Jr., special agent in charge of ICE HSI in New Orleans. "This indictment should send the clear message that HSI and its law enforcement partners will identify and dismantle those criminal organizations that perpetrate document fraud. We are committed to ensuring that our nation's security is not breached in this manner."

Indicted were: Manolo Mendez Escobar, a/k/a Johnny Ayala Garcia, 27, of Guatemala; Pascual Ramirez-Ramirez, 35, of Guatemala; Juan Antonio Hernandez, 43, of Cleveland, Tenn.; James Darrell Ward, 48, of Chattanooga, Tenn.; Francisco Baltazar Pedro, 45, of Monterey, Tenn.; and Amilcar Lerdo, of Gainesville, Ga.

Escobar was also charged with falsely claiming to be a U.S. citizen. Escobar, Hernandez, Ramirez and Baltazar have been arrested. A new trial date for all of the defendants has not yet been set.

The indictment alleges that between July 2009 and January 2011, the individuals agreed with one another to transport ineligible applicants to the driver's license testing site on Bonny Oaks Drive in Chattanooga, Tenn. The applicants presented counterfeit documents to Ward, a DMV employee, who in exchange for cash, unlawfully produced Tennessee drivers licenses.

If convicted, each defendant faces a maximum term of 15 years in prison, \$250,000 fine and up to three years of supervised release.

"I want to congratulate the Tennessee Highway Patrol, Criminal Investigation Division, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Secret Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Athens City Police Department for their collaborative efforts in this investigation and

resulting indictment," said U.S. Attorney Bill Killian, Eastern District of Tennessee. "Due to the potential harm, we take these cases very seriously."

Assistant U.S. Attorney James T. Brooks will represent the United States.