



U. S. Department of Justice

*United States Attorney
Northern District of Illinois*

*Patrick J. Fitzgerald
United States Attorney*

*Federal Building
219 South Dearborn Street, Fifth Floor
Chicago, Illinois 60604
(312) 353-5300*

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PRESS CONTACTS:
AUSA Jeffrey Cramer (312) 886-7631
AUSA/PIO Randall Samborn (312) 353-5318

**FIVE WOMEN ARRESTED ON FINANCIAL FRAUD CHARGES ALLEGEDLY
SCAMMED \$600,000 IN MERCHANDISE AT RETAIL STORES USING FALSE IDs**

CHICAGO -- Five Chicago and area women, including a mother and her daughter, were arrested today on federal charges for allegedly obtaining by fraud assorted merchandise valued at more than \$600,000 from department stores and other retailers in as many as eight states, primarily in the Midwest and Florida, dating as far back as 1998. Separate criminal complaints against each defendant allege that, in numerous instances, each woman allegedly presented false identification to store clerks and paid for merchandise worth hundreds of dollars at a time with fraudulent bank checks. In all, more than 100 different names and addresses were used, and, in each instance, the check was fraudulent in that the bank routing number was accurate but the checking account number was not a real account, according to the charges announced by Patrick J. Fitzgerald, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, and Arnette F. Heintze, Special Agent-in-Charge of the U.S. Secret Service in Chicago.

Secret Service agents arrested the defendants early today, assisted by the Chicago Police Department and the Illinois State Police. Also assisting in the investigation were the Indiana State Police, the Wisconsin State Police, the Florida Highway Patrol and Target Corp., the parent company of Target and Marshall Fields stores, where many of the allegedly fraudulent purchases

occurred in the Chicago area. At the same, authorities executed search warrants at the residences of four of the women, seizing what appeared to be identification documents, records, computer equipment and a shredding machine.

Each defendant was charged with check fraud, and was scheduled to have initial court appearance at 3 p.m. today before Magistrate Judge Arlander Keys in U.S. District Court. The defendants and specific allegations against each are:

Belinda Johnson, 44, of 728 West 138th St., 1st floor, Riverdale; between August 1998 and April 2002, allegedly purchased more than \$31,000 worth of merchandise from Marshall Fields and Target stores in Illinois and seven other states. Two check insurance companies -- Telecheck Check Services and Certegy, Inc. -- have paid more than \$40,000 as a result of allegedly fraudulent checks written at stores in Illinois alone by Johnson using false identification and bogus checks;

Shikila Blount, 21, Johnson's daughter who lives at the same Riverdale address; between July 1999 and March 2002, allegedly purchased more than \$15,000 worth of merchandise from Marshall Fields stores in Illinois and six other states. Telecheck and Certegy have paid more than \$53,000 as a result of allegedly fraudulent checks she wrote at stores in Illinois alone;

Robin Hatchett, 21, of 8552 South Kingston, Chicago; between September 1999 and February 2002, allegedly purchased more than \$9,000 worth of merchandise from Marshall Fields stores in Illinois and four other states. Telecheck and Certegy have paid more than \$41,000 as a result of allegedly fraudulent checks she wrote at stores in Illinois alone;

Genell Lonie, 29, of 705 East 78th St., Apt. 2W, Chicago; between August 1998 and March 2002, allegedly purchased more than \$27,000 worth of merchandise from Marshall Fields and Target stores in Illinois and five other states. Telecheck and Certegy have paid more than \$121,000 as a result of allegedly fraudulent checks she wrote at stores in Illinois alone; and

"Jane Doe," later tentatively identified as **Tijuana Leonard**, 23, of 728 West 138th St., 2nd floor, Riverdale; between March 1999 and October 2001, allegedly purchased more than \$3,800 worth of merchandise from Marshall Fields and Target stores in Illinois and five other states. Telecheck and Certegy have paid more than \$22,000 as a result of allegedly fraudulent checks she wrote at stores in Illinois alone.

In the Chicago area, stores where the allegedly fraudulent purchases occurred were located in Aurora, Naperville, Schaumburg, Joliet, Northbrook, Matteson, Melrose Park, West Dundee, Gurnee, Calumet City, Orland Park and downtown Chicago. Other locations included Michigan City, Ind., and Tampa, Fla.

The government is being represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Cramer.

If convicted, check fraud carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. The Court, which also must order restitution, would determine the appropriate sentence to be imposed under the United States Sentencing Guidelines.

The public is reminded that a complaint contains only charges and is not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed innocent and are entitled to a fair trial at which the United States has the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

Editors note: To arrange broadcast interviews regarding today's arrests and charges, contact Special Agent Robert Gray at the Chicago Secret Service office. The telephone number is (312) 353-5431.

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