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**ELEVEN DEFENDANTS FACING CHECK FRAUD CHARGES FOR
ALLEGEDLY SCAMMING \$300,000 IN MERCHANDISE AT RETAIL STORES**

CHICAGO -- Eleven Chicago and area defendants are facing federal charges for allegedly using fraudulent and counterfeit checks to obtain assorted merchandise valued at more than \$300,000 from department stores and other retailers in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin, dating as far back as 1997. Agents of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service began arresting the defendants yesterday and today and six defendants were in custody as of this afternoon. All 11 defendants were charged in a 17-count federal grand jury indictment that was unsealed following the initial arrests, announced Patrick J. Fitzgerald, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, and Anita L. Davidson, Inspector-in-Charge of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service in Chicago.

The indictment alleges that the defendants produced, used and trafficked in unauthorized legitimate checks and counterfeit checks to purchase merchandise from retailers and then either kept the goods or returned the items in exchange for cash refunds.

Each defendant was charged with one count of conspiracy to commit check fraud between June 1997 and July 29, 2002. In addition, nine of the defendant face one or more individual counts of check fraud or possession of checks stolen from the mail. The indictment also seeks forfeiture of \$300,000 or substitute assets, as well as assorted personal computer equipment, from defendants

Cocinette Smith and her brother, **Jermaine Price**. The defendants who were arrested were having initial court appearances today before Magistrate Judge Sidney I. Schenkier in U.S. District Court.

The defendants and their last known addresses are:

Cocinette Smith, 41 (1/24/61), of 612 North Lorel, Chicago;
Jermaine N. Price, 29 (10/24/73), 2448 South 21st Ave., Broadview;
Rochette Smith, (another sister) 39 (11/3/63), of 7428 Washington, Forest Park;
Patricia Daugherty, 38 (1/30/64), of 41 South 16th Ave., Maywood;
John Anthony Smith, 40 (12/15/61), of 5455 West Iowa, Chicago;
Nathaniel Brown, 37 (1/8/65), of 2325 West Maypole, Chicago;
Renetta Davis, 43 (12/3/58), of 858 North Latrobe, Chicago;
Gregory Davis, 61 (5/15/41), of 5524 West Cortland, 2nd floor, Chicago;
Mary Ann Sloan, 40 (1/26/62), of 1337 East 133rd, Chicago;
Bernice Smith, 42 (6/6/60), of 5455 West Iowa, Chicago; and
Sharon White, 43 (4/17/59), address unavailable.

As part of the conspiracy, the indictment alleges that the defendants would change the date printed on the receipt for merchandise purchased in order to return items before the retailer was aware that the check used to purchase the items was not valid, either because it was unauthorized or counterfeit. The defendants also allegedly altered or manufactured identification documents – some of them stolen – such as blank checks, social security cards, marriage licenses and birth certificates. They also used traffic tickets, which they allegedly purchased or otherwise obtained and then altered to use as an identification documents along with the bogus or unauthorized checks to purchase merchandise.

As a result of the alleged fraud conspiracy, stores identified in the indictment as suffering a combined loss exceeding \$300,000 are: Target Corp. (including Target Stores and Marshall Field's), Kohl's, Dominick's, and Kaybee Toy Stores, in addition to other retailers, which were not identified. Stores where the allegedly fraudulent purchases occurred were located in Elmhurst, North Riverside, Chicago, Gurnee, Vernon Hills, Schaumburg, Downer's Grove, Niles, Oak Brook, Hodgkins, Rockford, Racine, Wis.,

The U.S. Secret Service assisted in the investigation, as did Target Corp., the parent company of Target and Marshall Field's stores.

The government is being represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney David Weisman and Timothy Chapman.

If convicted, conspiracy to commit check fraud carries a maximum penalty of 5 years in prison, each of the other counts carries a maximum penalty ranging from 5 to 15 years in prison, and all counts carry a maximum fine of \$250,000. 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 an indictment 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.

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