

NEWS

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Four New Jersey Men Charged in Plot to
Extort Landscaping/Paving Business Owner

(More)

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NEWARK – Four New Jersey men were named in an eight-count Indictment unsealed today charging them with conspiring to extort the owner of a Hawthorne landscaping and paving business, U.S. Attorney Paul J. Fishman announced.

Michael C. Sciarra, 74, of Pompton Plains, his nephew Michael A. Sciarra, 46, of Union City, and Mark Ventricelli, 25, of Union City, were arrested this morning at their homes by Special Agents of the FBI. Peter Ventricelli, 31, of Parlin, the brother of Mark Ventricelli, is currently on house arrest on previously filed federal charges.

The four defendants made initial appearances today before U.S. Magistrate Judge Patty Shwartz, who released the Michael C. Sciarra on a \$250,000 secured bond with home confinement with electronic monitoring. Judge Shwartz released Michael A. Sciarra on \$100,000 secured bond; Peter Ventricelli on a \$150,000 secured bond with home confinement with electronic monitoring; and detained Mark Ventricelli pending a bail hearing.

Count One of the Indictment alleges that from about May 2006 through February 2009, the four defendants conspired to obtain money and property from an individual identified only as “M.H.,” through the use of threats of force and violence. According to the Indictment, M.H. was the owner of Harrington Landscape. The Indictment alleges that Peter Ventricelli, who was an employee of Harrington Landscape, at various times, invested money into the company which he initially claimed were his personal or family funds. According to the Indictment, Peter Ventricelli later advised M.H. that the money was owed to Michael C. Sciarra, whom he implied was associated with organized crime, and that M.H. needed to make significant monthly interest payments called “vig,” which would not reduce the principal amount of the claimed debts.

The Indictment further alleges that defendants Peter Ventricelli and Michael C. Sciarra used implicit and explicit threats of force and violence to obtain payments from M.H. During one incident alleged in the Indictment, Peter Ventricelli fired a .22 caliber pistol from M.H.’s apartment balcony and warned M.H. in substance that if you shoot someone with a .22 there is a better chance of killing them because the bullet would bounce around in their head; Peter Ventricelli then contacted Mark Ventricelli who retrieved two .22 caliber pistols from Peter Ventricelli. The Indictment further alleges that in September 2008, during a conversation between Mark Ventricelli and M.H., Peter Ventricelli threatened M.H., in substance, that he was dead and they were coming to get him that night.

Count One of the Indictment also alleges that Michael A. Sciarra, a partner in Town Check Cashing in Hoboken, facilitated the extortion by cashing certain Harrington Landscape customer checks presented by M.H. at Town Checking which cash was then used by M.H. to make vig payments. The Indictment further alleges that Michael A. Sciarra instructed employees of Town Check Cashing not to file paperwork required by federal law and state banking regulations in order to prevent a paper trail of the vig payments. According to the Indictment, M.H. made a total of more than \$200,000 in vig payments during the course of the extortion conspiracy.

Counts Two through Five of the Indictment charge Michael A. Sciarra and Peter Ventricelli with committing extortion against M.H. with respect to four separate debts described in Count One.

Count Six charges Peter Ventricelli with obtaining an additional \$68,000 from M.H. in a separate extortion. According to the Indictment, Peter Ventricelli used threats of force and

violence to induce M.H. to pay monthly \$5,700 mortgage payments on a home belonging to Peter Ventricelli's mother.

Count Seven of the Indictment charges that on or about Oct. 23, 2008, Michael C. Sciarra collected on a loan from L.G. using extortionate means, that is, the use of, or explicit or implicit threat of use, of violence or criminal means.

Lastly, Count Eight charges Michael C. Sciarra, Peter Ventricelli, and Mark Ventricelli with making a loan to T.H. with the understanding that violence or other criminal means would be used if timely payments were not made.

Each of the Counts charged in the Indictment carry a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

In determining an actual sentence, the judge to whom the case is eventually assigned would, upon a conviction, consult the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges that take into account the severity and characteristics of the offense, the defendant's criminal history, if any, and other factors. The judge, however, is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence.

Parole has been abolished in the federal system. Defendants who are given custodial terms must serve nearly all that time.

Despite Indictment, each defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt following a trial at which the defendant has all of the trial rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and federal law.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Leslie Faye Schwartz of the U.S. Attorney Office's Strike Force unit in Newark.

Fishman credited Special Agents of the FBI, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Weysan Dun, with the investigation leading to the Indictment. Fishman also thanked the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office, under the direction of Prosecutor Luis A. Valentin, for their assistance in the investigation.

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Defense Counsel:

Michael C. Sciarra: Chris Franzblau, Esq. Livingston
Peter Ventricelli: Michael Pedicini, Esq. Morristown
Mark Ventricelli: Gerald Miller, Esq. Jersey City
Michael A. Sciarra: Anthony Pope, Esq. Newark