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IDENTITY THEFT RINGLEADER CONVICTED

Man who was wooing bank employees for account information faces prison sentence

PHILADELPHIA - Miguel Bell, 36, of Philadelphia, was convicted today of running an identity theft ring that involved 24 other people in attempts to obtain more than \$1 million from the bank accounts of their victims, announced United States Attorney Zane David Memeger. Between September 1, 2005 and November 30, 2008, Bell and his co-defendants obtained names, dates of births, addresses, social security numbers, and bank account numbers of customers of Citizens Bank, PNC Bank, Wachovia Bank, M&T Bank, Provident Bank, Sun Trust Bank, Commerce Bank, and Sovereign Bank. Bell sometimes accomplished this by initiating a romantic relationship with the information holders, who included bank workers and an insurance company employee. The four defendants charged in the indictment with Bell - Christopher Russell, Kareem Russell, Michael Merin, and Tamika Brown - all pleaded guilty prior to trial.

Bell was convicted of conspiracy to commit bank fraud and aggravated identity theft, bank fraud, and aggravated identity theft. U.S. District Court Judge Gene E.K. Pratter scheduled Bell's sentencing hearing for September 28, 2011. He is facing a statutory maximum possible sentence of 331 years in prison with a two year mandatory minimum, a possible fine of up to \$16.75 million, and restitution in the amount of \$1.3 million.

Bell and defendant Christopher Russell verified balances in the accounts they targeted by calling the banks' automated services line and accessing the account information. Bell then allegedly arranged for phony driver's licenses to be made for "check runners" that he recruited with the help of Christopher and Kareem Russell. Once the check runners cashed the fraudulent checks, Bell would collect the proceeds and pay the check runners. Christopher Russell, at times, also collected the proceeds, passed the ill-gotten gains on to defendant Bell, and then paid the check runners.

Defendant Michael Merin recruited bank employees who provided confidential identifying information about bank customers and their accounts; defendant Tamika Brown provided check runners with clothing for their driver's license photos and for their trips to cash checks at the banks. Ten of the bank employees, the car dealership employee, the insurance company employee, and the eight check runners were all charged elsewhere.

The case was investigated by the United States Postal Inspection Service and the United States Secret Service. It is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney K.T. Newton.

This case is part of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Identity Crimes Task Force, a multi-agency cooperative effort involving federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies pooling their knowledge and resources to crackdown on identity theft.

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