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NINE BAKERSFIELD RESIDENTS CHARGED WITH FRAUD IN CONNECTION WITH FUNDS INTENDED FOR VICTIMS OF HURRICANE KATRINA

FRESNO- United States Attorney McGregor W. Scott announced today that over the past three days, nine Bakersfield residents have been charged with participating in a wire fraud scheme to defraud the American Red Cross of funds intended for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Eight of those defendants have been arrested and have been ordered detained by United States Magistrate Judge Theresa A. Goldner, sitting in Bakersfield. Those individuals are: TRENT JERMAINE PRESLEE, age 33, AMINAH RANDLE, age 19, ROBERT JOHNSON, age 23, MIKO SHANNIA NOBLES, age 22, TONJUA RANDLE, age 39, SHEENA PORTER, age 21, STANLEY LEWIS, age 44, and CANDICE BROWN, age 20. ELIZABETH RAY has also been charged and a warrant has been issued for her arrest.

All of these cases are being investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Bakersfield, California, with the assistance of the Bakersfield Police Department. The cases are being prosecuted by the United States Attorney's Office in Fresno, California. The investigation is continuing.

"It is beyond the pale that there are those who would seek to capitalize on the tragedy wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the generosity of so many who donated relief funds," United States Attorney Scott commented.

According to Assistant United States Attorneys Mark E. Cullers, Jonathan B. Conklin and Stanley A. Boone, who are prosecuting the cases, each defendant is charged by way of a separate criminal complaint with participating in a plan or scheme to defraud the Red Cross by submitting or causing others to submit a fraudulent claim through the Red Cross call center located in Bakersfield, California. The complaint explains that the Red Cross, in an attempt to expedite payments to actual victims of Hurricane Katrina, has set up at least two call centers in the United States, the largest of which is located in Bakersfield. According to the complaint, when a person contacts the call center to request assistance, their personal information, including an address within the area affected by the hurricane, is verified by call center employees. Once that information is verified, the caller is provided instructions on how to obtain financial assistance from the Red Cross. Once assistance is approved, a victim is given instructions on how to

obtain that assistance at their closest Western Union branch.

AMINAH RANDLE, ROBERT JOHNSON, ELIZABETH RAY, and SHEENA PORTER were employed at the Bakersfield Red Cross call center. TRENT JERMAINE PRESLIE, CANDICE BROWN, TONJUA RANDLE, STANLEY LEWIS, and MIKO NOBLES were closely associated with someone who was so employed. They were able to obtain false claim information and, using that information, obtain payment from Western Union. United States Attorney Scott emphasized that both the Red Cross and Western Union have provided substantial assistance in the investigation and are working diligently to prevent further losses from occurring.

Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales recently created the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, designed to deter, investigate and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes such as charity fraud, identity theft and insurance fraud. The Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force -- chaired by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division -- includes members from the FBI, the Postal Inspection Service, and the Executive Office of the United States Attorneys, and the Federal Trade Commission, among others.

The eight arrested defendants will next appear in federal court in Fresno, California, on Wednesday, October 5, 2005, for further hearings related to the charges. The charged count for each defendant carries a maximum of 20 years in prison and/or a \$250,000 fine. A preliminary hearing has been scheduled for Friday, October 14, 2005, also in federal court in Fresno, for all defendants.

The charges are only allegations, and the defendants are presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

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