



Department of Investigation

Press Release

DISTRICT ATTORNEY - BRONX COUNTY

Two Bronx Women Indicted On Grand Larceny Charges For Cashing Counterfeit City Department Of Finance Vendor Checks

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2000

Bronx District Attorney Robert T. Johnson and New York City Department of Investigation Commissioner Edward J. Kuriansky announced today that two 22-year-old Bronx women have been indicted on Grand Larceny charges for allegedly cashing City Department of Finance vendor checks that they knew were counterfeit.

A Grand Jury has charged Stella Benjamin, and Shameeka Paniagua, both of the Bronx, with stealing a total of \$9,000 from Chase Manhattan Bank. The pair are accused of making unlawful cash withdrawals days after depositing counterfeit City Department of Finance vendor checks totaling more than \$15,800 in their personal accounts.

Benjamin and Paniagua were arraigned yesterday before Acting Supreme Court Justice John Byrne, then released on their own recognizance. Benjamin will appear in State Supreme Court on November 14, 2000, and Paniagua, On November 21, 2000, in Part A. Each defendant was charged with 1 count of Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the 3rd degree, 1 count of Criminal Possession of a Forged Instrument in the 2nd degree and 1 count of Grand Larceny in the 3rd degree. All are Class "D" felony offenses punishable by a maximum sentence of up to 7 years imprisonment on each count.

The investigation resulting in these arrests began in February when Chase officials reported that two fake City vendor checks had been deposited in two separate bank accounts, and that a total of \$9,000 had been fraudulently withdrawn. The two counterfeit City vendor checks, each dated January 27, 2000, listed the Office of the Comptroller Department of Finance as the maker, had been deposited on February 4, 2000, at separate Chase branches in the Bronx.

Benjamin deposited a check made payable to herself, in the amount of \$6,965.21 at the Chase branch located at 270 East 137th Street. Paniagua also deposited a check made payable to herself in the amount of \$8,965.21, at the 5 West Burnside Avenue branch.

It is further alleged that on February 8, 2000, Benjamin withdrew \$4,000 from her saving account, and that on February 8, 2000, Paniagua, cashed two personal checks totaling \$5,000 at the Chase branch located at 160 East 125th Street in upper Manhattan.

This case may be linked to a similar scheme involving an attempt by a 19-year-old Bronx woman Tabathia Flowers, to negotiate, on February 14, 2000, a counterfeit \$7,251 City vendor check at a Bronx check-cashing firm. Flowers, who was arrested by police at the check-cashing outlet, later pled guilty to attempted Grand Larceny, and was sentenced in August to serve three years probation.

District Attorney Johnson thanked Chase Manhattan Bank's supervisory personnel for their alertness and quick response in referring this matter for prosecution. In addition, Mr. Johnson also acknowledges the hard work of Commissioner Kuriansky and members of his staff, Vincent E. Green Assistant Commissioner and Department of Finance Inspector General, Deputy Inspector General Maureen A. Thomas, Assistant Inspector General Jeffrey Dolcimascolo, and Investigative Auditor Mariquita Sabile, for their cooperation during this investigation.

Assistant District Attorney Patrick Breen of the Investigations Division is prosecuting this case.