



The City of New York
Department of Investigation

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**TWO DEFENDANTS, INCLUDING AN HRA EMPLOYEE, ARE CHARGED IN SCAM
THAT STOLE \$1,500 FROM A NEW YORKER ON THE VERGE OF HOMELESSNESS**

Margaret Garnett, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Investigation (“DOI”), issued a statement on the indictment unsealed today that charges an employee of the City Human Resources Administration (“HRA”), and another individual, for their participation in a scam that tricked an HRA client seeking rental assistance to provide them with blank money orders valued at a total of \$1,500, which the defendants allegedly cashed and stole. DOI began its investigation after it was alerted by HRA about allegations involving the scam, and then worked with the Bronx District Attorney’s Office, which is prosecuting this matter.

LUIS RODRIGUEZ, 56, of the Bronx, N.Y., an Associate Job Opportunity Specialist employed by HRA, and ELSIE MERCADO, 50, of the Bronx, N.Y., were each charged with Grand Larceny in the Fourth Degree, a class E felony, and Petit Larceny, a class A misdemeanor. RODRIGUEZ was also charged with Official Misconduct, a class A misdemeanor. Upon conviction, a class E felony is punishable by up to four years in prison and a class A misdemeanor is punishable by up to a year’s incarceration.

RODRIGUEZ has been employed with HRA since February 1988 and receives an annual salary of approximately \$69,996. He works for HRA’s HomeBase program, a homelessness prevention program.

DOI Commissioner Margaret Garnett said, “This indictment highlights the damaging and deeply personal toll that corruption and greed can cause. Here, a New Yorker on the verge of homelessness sought assistance from the City and instead became the unwitting target of a theft scheme perpetrated by two defendants, including the very City employee assigned to help her, according to the charges. To anyone, most especially City employees who use City services as a way to con others, today’s arrests are a stark warning that criminal conduct will be exposed and those associated with it held accountable. DOI thanks HRA for reporting these allegations and the Bronx District Attorney’s Office for its partnership on this investigation.”

Bronx District Attorney Darcel D. Clark said, “New Yorkers in need must be able to trust City employees whose job it is to help them get assistance. We will hold accountable those who would cheat vulnerable people and betray that trust.”

According to the indictment and the investigation, between May 4 and 6, 2017, RODRIGUEZ directed a client of HRA’s HomeBase program, which assists tenants on the verge of eviction, to provide him with two signed money orders left blank in the payee section, to show that she could provide some funding for rent. As requested, the client provided to RODRIGUEZ the two money orders, each valued at \$750. RODRIGUEZ worked with MERCADO to cash the money orders at a check cashing establishment in the Bronx and then pocketed the money, according to the indictment and investigation.

Please note that HRA will never ask rental assistance clients to provide a money order that is left blank in the payee section.

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Commissioner Garnett thanked Bronx District Attorney Darcel D. Clark, and her staff, for their prosecution of the case, specifically Assistant District Attorneys Sean McCauley and Rossana Gallego-Manzano of the Public Integrity Bureau, under the supervision of Omer Wiczzyk, Chief of the Public Integrity Bureau, and Ilya Kharkover, Deputy Bureau Chief. Commissioner Garnett also thanked HRA Commissioner Steven Banks for his and his staff's cooperation in this investigation.

The investigation was conducted by DOI's Office of the Inspector General for HRA, specifically Assistant Inspector General Jeremy Reyes, under the supervision of Deputy Inspector General Audrey Feldman, Inspector General John M. Bellanie, Deputy Commissioner/Chief of Investigations Dominick Zarrella, and First Deputy Commissioner Daniel Cort; and with the assistance of DOI's Squad of NYPD Detectives.

An indictment is an accusation. Defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

DOI is one of the oldest law-enforcement agencies in the country and New York City's corruption watchdog. Investigations may involve any agency, officer, elected official or employee of the City, as well as those who do business with or receive benefits from the City. DOI's strategy attacks corruption comprehensively through systemic investigations that lead to high-impact arrests, preventive internal controls and operational reforms that improve the way the City runs.

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