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SOUTHFIELD, STERLING HEIGHTS RESIDENTS
INDICTED IN LARGE SCALE FOOD STAMP FRAUD OPERATION IN DETROIT

DICRA ZIA, 38, of Southfield, LATIF BARASH, 42 and MONTHA BARASH, 36, both of Sterling Heights, were indicted today by a federal grand jury in Detroit on charges of conspiracy, food stamp fraud, wire fraud and money laundering, stemming from their operation of Express Lanes Party Store at 12546 Dexter, Detroit, Michigan, from April 2004 through November 2005, announced Acting United States Attorney Terrence Berg.

The indictment charges that during that time period, the defendants, doing business as Express Lanes, an authorized food stamp program retailer, abused and violated the regulations governing the United States Department of Agriculture funded food stamp program by purchasing food stamp benefits, usually for half of their value, from food stamp benefit recipients. It is alleged that the trio purchased over \$938,000 in food stamp benefits for cash during that period for less than half of their value. Federal law strictly forbids the sale of food stamp benefits inasmuch as Congress created and funded the program for the express purpose of helping to feed individuals and families that would otherwise be unable to purchase food to sustain themselves. The indictment also alleges that DICRA ZIA and LATIF BARASH engaged in monetary transactions with the proceeds of food stamp fraud and wire fraud, knowing them to be proceeds of illegal activities, commonly referred to as money laundering.

Acting United States Attorney Terrence Berg said, "The practice of food stamp benefit 'discounting' as it has come to be known, takes federal moneys earmarked to feed the needy

and, instead, enriches those who participate. This case is particularly egregious not only because of the amount of food stamp benefit proceeds that were diverted from the truly deserving, but also because of the callousness of the behavior. The indictment alleges, for example, that LATIF BARASH offered to purchase \$10,000 of food stamp benefits for \$5,500 in cash from an undercover federal agent whom he believed ran a homeless shelter and was selling benefits intended to feed the homeless.”

An indictment is only a charge and is not evidence of guilt. A defendant is entitled to a fair trial in which it will be the government's burden to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. If convicted, the defendants face penalties of up to 20 years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine for each count of food stamp fraud and wire fraud, 10 years and \$250,000 for the money laundering counts (as to DICRA ZIA and LATIF BARASH, only) and five years and \$250,000 for conspiracy. Additionally, the defendants face forfeiture of any assets which are traceable to, derived from, or which were used to facilitate the charged criminal offenses

The case was investigated by special agents of the United States Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General, the United States Internal Revenue Service, Criminal Investigation Division, with the assistance of the Michigan State Police.