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Friday, December 8, 2017

Worcester Business Owner Pleads Guilty to Defrauding SNAP Benefits Program and Selling Counterfeit Merchandise

BOSTON – The owner of Esther's Fashion Paradise in Worcester pleaded guilty yesterday in federal court to defrauding the SNAP benefits program and selling counterfeit merchandise.

Esther Acquaye, 31, of Worcester, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to acquire, possess, and redeem SNAP benefits in an unauthorized manner, and to convert public money; one count of SNAP fraud; and one count of trafficking in counterfeit goods. U.S. District Court Judge Timothy S. Hillman scheduled sentencing for March 7, 2018.

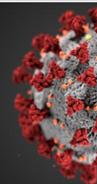
On numerous occasions between November 2013 and April 2016, Acquaye, the owner of Esther's Fashion Paradise in Worcester, accepted EBT cards from SNAP recipients wishing to exchange their SNAP benefits for cash. Specifically, Acquaye passed the EBT cards through a point-of-sale terminal causing the full value of the SNAP benefits to be electronically transferred to her business, and then provided less than the full value of the SNAP benefits in cash to the SNAP recipients. In total, Acquaye caused approximately \$282,541 in fraudulent EBT transactions and SNAP benefits to be transacted at Esther's.

In addition, on at least four occasions between November 2015 and March 2016, Acquaye accepted an EBT card from an undercover investigator as payment for counterfeit retail goods. Acquaye sold the investigator two counterfeit Michael Kors purses, one counterfeit Gucci purse, one counterfeit The North Face jacket, and one counterfeit Michael Kors wallet.



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The charge of conspiracy provides for a sentence of no greater than five years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000. The charge of SNAP fraud provides for a sentence of no greater than 20 years in prison, three years of supervised release, and a fine of \$250,000, or twice the gross gain/loss, whichever is greater. The charge of trafficking in counterfeit goods provides for a sentence of no greater than 10 years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$2 million. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Acting United States Attorney William Weinreb; Bethanne M. Dinkins, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Inspector General, Office of Investigations, Northeast Region; and Michael Shea, Acting Special Agent in Charge of Homeland Security Investigations in Boston made the announcement today. Assistant U.S. Attorney Michelle Dineen Jerrett of Weinreb’s Worcester Branch Office is prosecuting the case.

Topic(s):
Consumer Protection
Financial Fraud

Component(s):
USAO - Massachusetts

Updated December 8, 2017



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