



NEWS RELEASE

Warren C. Evans
Sheriff

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Sheriff & Prosecutor announce ID Fraud arrests

◆ *Worker at Livonia of Secretary of State branch among those charged*

The Wayne County Sheriff's and Prosecutor's Offices have dismantled a loosely connected underground network of criminals who have been issuing everything from fake temporary vehicle license plates to fraudulent auto insurance to illegitimate Michigan driver's licenses, Sheriff Warren C. Evans and Prosecutor Kym L. Worthy announced today.

Last week deputies, working with investigators at the Michigan Department of State, arrested Janice Bess, 43, of Westland, a worker at the Secretary of State's branch office in Livonia. Investigators and prosecutors say Bess was issuing valid state license plates, vehicle titles and registration – even Michigan drivers' licenses – to people under fake identities.

Bess was arrested at her job on October 1st after having sold fraudulent documents to an undercover officer. On Monday, officers arrested Cheryl Simpson, 42, of Detroit, who investigators say found customers for Bess and brought them to her at her job.

"We believe that, for a price, Ms. Simpson would identify customers and Ms. Bess would produce these items using the name and personal information of an unwitting person already in the Secretary of State computer system," Evans said.

After Bess issued a new license plate and vehicle registration to the undercover deputy, who was using an assumed name and produced no identification, officers quietly escorted Bess out of SOS branch office at Six Mile and Newburgh Road and arrested her. Simultaneously, officers executed a search warrant on the Detroit home of Simpson, who had introduced the undercover officer to Bess. Deputies arrested Simpson at her home on Monday morning, October 8th.

According to investigators, Simpson also told an undercover deputy that Bess could provide the officer with a "whole new identity," complete with a state driver's license, with her photo but containing someone else's name, address and driver's license number taken from Secretary of State compute records.

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"It is incredible in a post September 11th world that a government employee would provide anyone with picture identification under a false name," Evans said. "The potential for homeland security issues here is significant."

Prosecutor Kym L. Worthy said that her office invested a significant amount of time on the investigation and stressed the importance of protecting people's identities.

"I never cease to be amazed that some people will risk a good job and their entire career to turn a fast illegal buck," said Prosecutor Worthy. "As we know people will do this when times are good and when they are bad; greed is the motivation. Now these defendants may go from dispensing licenses plates to making them in prison."

Evans and Worthy said that once the Secretary of State's Office was notified of the investigation, it cooperated fully, assisting along the way.

"The Department of State operates with the highest degree of integrity and professionalism," Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land said. "We take our mission - and the trust that comes with it - very seriously. We have no tolerance for any violation of that trust. While these types of allegations involving a department employee are few and far between, we're continually vigilant through our internal auditing and investigative procedures. I applaud the professionalism of the Sheriff Evans and his office in this matter."

Routine case escalated quickly

Evans and Worthy said that this investigation began in one of the most mundane ways possible - a deputy noticing a fraudulent paper temporary license plate taped inside the back window of a vehicle the officer had pulled over. The driver of the vehicle cooperated, providing investigators with the name of the person who had sold them the pink 15-day "temp tag."

"From that point the investigation continued to escalate, as each person our investigators contacted gave us information on someone else," Evans said. "The seller of the temporary tags gave us some one who was selling fake auto insurance policies, who then gave us someone else. Eventually, one of the suspects told us about Ms. Simpson, who claimed to 'have someone inside the Secretary of State's Office,' referring to Ms. Bess."

With that information in hand, an undercover deputy was able to make contact with Ms. Simpson and both went to the SOS Livonia branch, where Bess produced a license plate and vehicle registration with renewal tabs under an assumed name that Bess knew to be false.

In all five individuals have been arrested, including Bess and Simpson, and deputies and prosecutors are continuing their investigation.

Bess, who was released on personal bond, was arraigned on October 2nd and has been charged with:

- Forgery
- Use of a Computer to Commit a Crime
- Identity Theft (2 counts)
- False Certification - Impermissible Use of Personal Information (2 counts)

Simpson was arraigned Tuesday morning in Livonia District Court and faces the same charges as Bess, along with a Habitual 4th Offender charge.