



# NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE WELFARE INSPECTOR GENERAL

**Catherine Leahy Scott – Acting Welfare Inspector General**

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## **INSPECTOR GENERAL ANNOUNCES ARREST OF SYRACUSE BUSINESS OWNER AND ASSOCIATE FOR TRAFFICKING IN WELFARE BENEFIT CARDS**

*Store Owner Exchanged SNAP Benefits for Cash,  
Beer and to Stock Store Shelves*

New York State Acting Welfare Inspector General Catherine Leahy Scott announced the arrest of a Syracuse business owner and her associate on charges they illegally used Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards, making more than \$11,000 in fraudulent purchases between 2012 and 2014.

New York State Inspector General Scott, who also serves as New York State's Acting Welfare Inspector General, said: "The defendants are accused of abusing a system designed to assist individuals and families in need. They not only stole benefits intended for disadvantaged New Yorkers, they are alleged to have perverted the system to fund the sale of unauthorized items, and for their own personal gain. I will continue to work closely with Onondaga District Attorney William Fitzpatrick and his office to ensure the defendants are held fully accountable for any criminal acts committed."

Onondaga County District Attorney William J. Fitzpatrick said: "I am pleased to work with the Inspector General to root out and hold accountable those who defraud taxpayers through schemes and theft. This isn't the first time we've gone after individuals who steal from the system and it won't be the last."

Julia Shqair, 34, of Syracuse, was charged with four counts of Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Fourth Degree, a class E felony, and one count of Misuse of Food Stamps, a class D Felony. Haider Alwaeli, 27, of Syracuse, was charged with two counts of Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Fourth Degree, a class E Felony, and one count of Misuse of Food Stamps, a class D Felony. If convicted, Shqair and Alwaeli both face up to seven years in prison.

Inspector General Scott's investigation revealed that Shqair, the operator of Sabatino's Pizzeria and Deli, also known as "Sabs" located at 121 Ballantyne Ave., an authorized SNAP retailer, is alleged to have engaged in various SNAP trafficking schemes for nearly two years. The most prevalent scheme involved acquiring EBT cards from store customers in exchange for unauthorized items, such as cash, beer, cigarettes and prepared food. Typically, Shqair allegedly

charged the customer two times the value of these items. Shqair and Alwaeli, together and separately, are accused of repeatedly using these EBT cards at area retailers to purchase personal items or products resold at Sabs.

The arrest stems from an ongoing investigation by Inspector General Scott into the fraudulent use of EBT cards in the Syracuse and Dewitt areas. Last year 13 individuals, including two state employees, were arrested and faced charges for the theft and misuse of EBT cards. All 13 defendants were found guilty and sentenced for their roles and, as a result, the two state employees resigned their employment. Several of the cards used at Sabs were Hutchings Psychiatric Center residents.

In New York State, EBT cards are used by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) to deliver SNAP and cash benefits to those who qualify. SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps, is a federally funded program, which provides benefits to help low-income New Yorkers – working people, seniors, the disabled and others – feed their families. SNAP eligibility and benefit levels are based on household size, income, expenses, and other factors. SNAP benefits can be accessed at participating stores throughout New York using an EBT card. Stores authorized to accept SNAP benefits are licensed by the United State Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services.

The defendants were arraigned before the Hon. Kate Rosenthal of Syracuse City Court.

Inspector General Scott thanked the Onondaga Department of Social Services as well as Onondaga District Attorney Fitzpatrick and his office for their assistance in this investigation, and the District Attorney's Office for the arrest and prosecution of the defendants.

The defendants are deemed innocent unless and until proven guilty in a court of law.

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*The New York State Office of the Welfare Inspector General investigates fraud, abuse or illegal acts committed against public assistance programs designed to help those in need. Our office also investigates complaints about the agencies and local social services districts who administer social services programs. Complaints and referrals are kept confidential. We can be reached by calling toll free: 1-800-367-4448, utilizing our online complaint form: <http://www.ig.state.ny.gov> or sending an email to: [inspector.general@ig.ny.gov](mailto:inspector.general@ig.ny.gov). You also can write to our office at: Office of the Welfare Inspector General, Empire State Plaza, Agency Building 2, 16th Floor Albany, New York 12223.*