



February 8, 2017

### **Five Individuals Charged for Defrauding the Adult Public Assistance Program**

Today, the Office of Special Prosecutions charged five individuals for defrauding the Adult Public Assistance program. The Adult Public Assistance program is designed as a State supplement to the Federal Supplemental Security Income program. The Adult Public Assistance program, which is funded entirely with state funds, is only available to Alaska residents. Furthermore, the Adult Public Assistance program is a needs based program with an income limit for recipients.

All of the defendants in these cases were advised during the application process that they needed to contact the Division of Public Assistance (DPA) if they changed their state residence or left Alaska for more than 30 days. According to the allegations, four of the individuals are no longer living in Alaska, but continued receiving the benefits without notifying DPA. One individual received her aunt's public assistance benefits after her aunt moved outside of the U.S. This individual also received her aunt's public assistance benefits after her aunt passed away. A different individual also defrauded the PFD program while she was living out of state.

These five individuals are alleged to have collectively stolen \$54,738.00 worth of Adult Public Assistance. The total theft of all funds by these five individuals is allegedly \$66,197.30.

#### **Allegations Against Janet Tirona**

A family member of Janet Tirona was a long time recipient of Adult Public Assistance, Senior Benefits and Medicaid. Ms. Tirona was the authorized representative and power of attorney for her family member. As an authorized representative Ms. Tirona assisted her family member with public assistance applications and reporting changes to the Division of Public Assistance.

The Adult Public Assistance benefits were approved due to the family member's eligibility for Supplemental Security Income. The family member also received Senior Benefits since she was low-income and over 65 years of age. The family received the Adult Public Assistance benefit of \$362.00 per month and Senior Benefits of \$175.00 per month. Ms. Tirona and her family member were advised they needed to contact DPA, within ten days, if the family member changed her state residence or left Alaska for more than 30 days.

In November of 2013, the family member traveled on a one-way ticket to the Philippines and never returned to the U.S. Ms. Tirona traveled with her family member, but returned to Alaska. About a year and a half later, the family member passed away in the Philippines. Ms. Tirona never reported her family member's departure from the U.S. or her death to the Division of Public Assistance. Furthermore, Ms. Tirona used her family member's Adult Public Assistance, Senior Benefits and Medicaid on herself.

This resulted in an alleged theft of \$13,032.00 worth of Adult Public Assistance, \$3,962.30 worth of Medicaid and \$1,750.00 worth of Senior Benefits. If convicted, Ms. Tirona faces a possible sentence of up to 10 years in prison, a fine of up to \$100,000 and restitution to the State for the scheme to defraud charges.

#### **Allegations Against Manithong Phansakdy**

Manithong Phansakdy began receiving Adult Public Assistance in March of 2009. The Adult Public Assistance benefits were approved due to Ms. Phansakdy's eligibility for Supplemental Security Income. She received the Adult Public Assistance monthly benefit of \$362.00. Ms. Phansakdy was advised that he needed to contact DPA, within ten days, if she changed her state residence or left Alaska for more than 30 days.

Investigation by the DPA Fraud Control Unit revealed that Ms. Phansakdy allegedly moved to California in January of 2011 and never returned. Ms. Phansakdy never informed DPA that he moved to California. This resulted in an alleged theft of \$25,378.00 worth of Adult Public Assistance. If convicted, Ms. Phansakdy faces a possible sentence of up to 10 years in prison, a fine of up to \$100,000 and restitution to the State for the scheme to defraud charges.

#### **Allegations Against Pong Choi**

Pong Choi began receiving Adult Public Assistance in May of 2000. The Adult Public Assistance benefits were approved due to Ms. Choi's eligibility for Supplemental Security Income. She received the Adult Public Assistance monthly benefit of \$362.00. She was advised that he needed to contact DPA, within ten days, if she changed her state residence or left Alaska for more than 30 days. Furthermore, Ms. Choi applied for the

2015 PFD. Her 2015 PFD application was hand-delivered to the Anchorage PFD Office. Ms. Choi indicated that she lived in Palmer, AK.

Investigation by the DPA Fraud Control Unit revealed that Ms. Choi allegedly moved to Nevada in January of 2015. Ms. Choi never informed DPA that he moved outside of Alaska. This resulted in an alleged theft of \$7,640.00 worth of Adult Public Assistance and \$2,072.00 in PFD funds. Ms. Choi has been charged with two counts of theft in the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree and two counts of unsworn falsification in the 1<sup>st</sup> degree.

### **Allegations Against Tracie Lee-Mercer**

Tracie Lee-Mercer began receiving Adult Public Assistance in May of 2014. The Adult Public Assistance benefits were approved due to Ms. Lee-Mercer's eligibility for Supplemental Security Income. She received the Adult Public Assistance monthly benefit of \$362.00. Ms. Lee-Mercer was advised that she needed to contact DPA, within 10 days, if she changed her state residence or left Alaska for more than 30 days.

Investigation by the DPA Fraud Control Unit revealed that Ms. Lee-Mercer allegedly moved to Nevada in May of 2015 and never returned. Ms. Lee-Mercer never reported her change of residency to DPA. This resulted in an alleged theft of \$7,240.00 worth of Adult Public Assistance.

### **Allegations Against Stacey Cameron**

Stacey Cameron began receiving Adult Public Assistance in May of 2015. The Adult Public Assistance benefits were approved due to Ms. Cameron's eligibility for Supplemental Security Income. She received the Adult Public Assistance monthly benefit of \$362.00. Ms. Cameron was advised that she needed to contact DPA, within ten days, if she left Alaska for more than 30 days.

Investigation by the DPA Fraud Control Unit revealed that Ms. Cameron allegedly moved to Idaho in August of 2016. Ms. Cameron never reported her change of residency to DPA. This resulted in an alleged theft of \$1,448.00 worth of Adult Public Assistance.

### **Potential Penalties**

Pong Choi, Tracie Lee-Mercer and Stacey Cameron, face a possible sentence of up to five years in prison, a \$50,000 fine and restitution to the State of Alaska for the theft in the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree charges. Ms. Choi faces the same level of punishment for the unsworn falsification in the 1<sup>st</sup> degree charges.

All of the charges discussed herein are merely allegations and are not evidence of guilt. All of the defendants are presumed innocent. All of the defendants are entitled to a fair trial at which the government must prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

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