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**Department of Justice**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE Wednesday, July 14, 2021

**Husband And Wife Convenience  
Store Owners Sentenced To  
Prison And Ordered To Pay  
Restitution For Fraud Involving  
SNAP Program**

Jacksonville, Florida – U.S. District Judge Maria Morales Howard has sentenced Russell Leroy Dotson, Jr. (63, Jacksonville) and his wife, Maria Luisa Dotson (66, Jacksonville), to 18 months in federal prison each for

conspiracy to commit wire fraud involving the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The court also ordered the couple to pay \$257,919.10 in restitution and entered an order of forfeiture for the same amount against each of them.

Russell Dotson had pleaded guilty on July 26, 2019, and Maria Dotson had pleaded guilty on August 7, 2019.

According to court documents, the Dotsons owned and operated Asmarina Food Mart, which had two locations in Jacksonville. When the Dotsons opened their stores, they applied for and received approval from the Food and Nutrition Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to participate in SNAP, a program that supplements the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency. (Until 2008, SNAP was known as the Food Stamp Program.)

Once the Dotsons received this approval, they trained their employees on ways to conduct fraudulent transactions with SNAP recipients using their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, a type of debit card. Specifically, the Dotsons instructed their employees to ring up fraudulent transactions to make it appear that SNAP recipients had purchased eligible food products from the store using their EBT cards, when the recipients

actually purchased nothing at all or actually purchased items not eligible under the SNAP program. The employees then gave the SNAP recipients cash representing approximately one-half of the purported value of the fraudulent transaction, while the Dotsons kept the remainder of the money. Over approximately 27 months, Russell and Maria Dotson defrauded the United States out of \$257,979.10.

“This type of corruption involving fraud against the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program has managed to defraud American taxpayers and take money out of the hands of people who desperately need that assistance,” said Special Agent in Charge Glen M. Kessler of the U.S. Secret Service. “The U.S. Secret Service and our partners are always willing to take prompt and coordinated actions to hold these criminals responsible for placing personal greed above the good of the public.”

“The owners of Asmarina Food Mart created an illegal benefits exchange system that denied healthy foods to needy children and their families. Any retailer who chooses to defraud taxpayers through such schemes will continue to be aggressively investigated and prosecuted by USDA-OIG and its law enforcement partners,” stated Jason Williams, Special Agent in Charge, USDA-OIG.

This prosecution was part of a long-term investigation into SNAP fraud occurring at both Asmarina Food Mart locations in Jacksonville. To date, 12 other individuals, including employees of Asmarina Food Mart and SNAP recipients, have pleaded guilty and have been sentenced for their roles in this scheme (Shelly Rowe Sullivan, Teighlor Michelle Wicker, Tracy Lynn Hammock, Shannon Marie Whaley, Denise Diane Taylor, Ormetre Patterson, Cierra Elizabeth White, Laura Lockwood, Shanelle Bryant, Felicia Meadows, Theresa Marie Paschall, and Latosha Ransome Monroe) and collectively have been ordered to pay a total of \$249,829.67 in restitution to the United States.

This case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, the United States Secret Service - Jacksonville Field Office, and the United States Department of Agriculture - Office of Inspector General. It was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Kevin C. Frein.

Anyone who is aware of or suspects fraud involving SNAP benefits should visit <https://www.usda.gov/oig/hotline> or call 800-424-9121.

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**Topic(s):**

Financial Fraud

**Component(s):**

Office of the Inspector General  
USAO - Florida, Middle

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