



OFFICE OF THE
DISTRICT ATTORNEY
ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA
TODD SPITZER

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PRESS RELEASE

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**Efforts by Orange County District Attorney's Office, OC Law
Enforcement to Crack Down on Romanian Organized Crime
Skimming Operation Targeting Public Assistance Fund
Recipients has Reduced Theft by Nearly 55%**

SANTA ANA, Calif. - Forty-eight suspects believed to be tied to Romanian organized criminal organizations have been arrested across Orange County in countywide operation to crack down on skimming operations targeting recipients of public assistance funds intended to pay for basic necessities including diapers, formula, and food, Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer and law enforcement officials announced at a press conference today. Among those arrested is Florin Duduianu, one of Romania's most wanted criminals, who has since been indicted by a federal grand jury for fraudulently accessing government assistance funds.

California lost more than \$108 million in CalWORKs benefits (Cash aid to dependent families) in 2023. These "skimming" related losses occurred primarily during the first five days of every month as thieves targeted CalWORKs cash-aid benefits administered to California residents through Electronic Benefit Transfer Accounts (EBT).

Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer and law enforcement officials are calling on Governor Gavin Newsom to immediately implement chip technology for the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards as was done when California issued the Middle Class Tax Refund via chipped debit cards beginning in October 2022 to help Californians cope with rising gas prices and inflation. Chip technology would make it more difficult for thieves to clone EBT cards and illicitly withdraw funds.

More than \$185,000 in cash and 491 cloned public assistance cards worth \$471,360 in potential stolen funds have been recovered by investigators from the Orange County District Attorney's Office and 21 law enforcement agencies across Orange County since May 1, 2023. Operation EBT Integrity was led by the Orange County District Attorney's Office Public Assistance Division.

While the amount of EBT funds stolen went up more than \$2 million across California between January 2023 and January 2024, Orange County saw a 54.97% decrease in EBT funds stolen. The concerted efforts by Orange County law enforcement to crack down on EBT fraud resulted in loss percentages in Orange County going from 13.54% of the state total of stolen funds in January 2023 to 4.61% of the state total in January 2024.

“These are not victimless crimes. The victims are single mothers struggling to put a roof over their children’s heads and food on the table and hardworking people who need a helping hand who find themselves standing at the checkout line with bags full of groceries only to be humiliated when they find that they have no money in their account because a thief has surreptitiously taken everything,” said Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer. “Meanwhile, the thieves are using this money to fund organized crime, buy luxury cars worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and to lead a life of luxury that the true recipients can only dream about. I am incredibly proud of my team at the District Attorney’s Office and the collaboration we have had with allied law enforcement agencies in our county to significantly reduce the theft of public funds. The state of California has to stop the bleeding and make the necessary technological upgrades to protect the rightful recipients of these funds and safeguard taxpayers from having to pay millions of dollars in replacement funds to pay back what was stolen.”

A suspect in Cypress was arrested with \$30,000 in cash and 60 cloned EBT cards manufactured using stolen EBT card numbers and PIN numbers. A suspect in Brea was arrested with \$27,000 along with 42 cloned cards. Orange County probation officers uncovered 222 cloned cards while conducting a probation search, and a suspect in Seal Beach was arrested with more than \$14,000 stuffed in a glove box after making repeated withdrawals using cloned EBT cards at a convenience store ATM and then returning with more cloned cards to make additional illegal withdrawals.

CalFresh benefits are intended for low-income California residents who meet federal income eligibility guidelines to help purchase healthy and nutritious food for their households. CalWorks benefits are intended for low-income California residents with children who meet federal income eligibility rules for cash aid to use for expenses including housing, utilities, or medical care. Once a resident qualified for CalFresh or CalWorks benefits the California Department of Social Services issues an EBT card to the recipient that can be used to access the recipient’s EBT account through ATMs or to make point-of-sale purchases through debit transactions using a Personal Identification Number (PIN). EBT funds are generally deposited into EBT accounts during the first five days of every month.

The suspects are accused of participating in an organized criminal effort that involves installing skimming devices, often small in size, with the capability to record, store or transmit data, often through Bluetooth technology. Some of these devices could be installed out of the view of customers inside standalone point of sale (POS) terminals such as a gas station pump or ATM and are designed to intercept data from access cards that were swiped. A very small camera is also attached to some ATM machines to record customers entering their personal identification number (PINs) on the number pad. The information recovered from or transmitted by a skimming device could then be used alone or in conjunction with another access device to make charges or withdraw funds from a victim’s account without the victim’s consent, knowledge, or authorization.

Many of the suspects have been determined to have entered the United States through illegal border crossings and a lack of accurate criminal history has made it difficult for prosecutors to argue for higher bail or no bail.

In just the first five days in June 2023, California EBT recipients had \$8,040,975.93 stolen out of their skimmed EBT accounts as a result of transactions involving 14,975 cloned EBT cards. In Orange County, EBT recipients were the victims of \$659,161.50 in illicit withdrawals during that same five days in June, with thieves using 1,420 cloned EBT cards to drain recipient's bank accounts. Thieves are also stealing CalFresh food stamp funds to buy baby formula and energy drinks to resell in Mexico and then funneling that money to organized crime families in Romania.

EBT recipients who prove their funds were fraudulently withdrawn are entitled to be reimbursed for just one month's distribution, which averages \$960 for CalWorks recipients.

"Targeting vulnerable Californians who are trying to provide basic necessities for themselves and their families is a heinous crime," said Attorney Rob General Bonta. "I am grateful for the hard work of the Orange County District Attorney's Office in holding the perpetrators behind such crimes accountable. The California Department of Justice stands with our law enforcement partners across the state in our shared commitment to protecting Californians from theft and fraud."

Several suspects accused of stealing public assistance funds can be seen in public social media posts driving luxury cars worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, flaunting Rolex watches, and wearing designer clothes and shoes, with one post bragging in Romanian "Don't love what isn't yours, you can make it yours."

Several of the individuals arrested are juveniles under the age of 14. Welfare and Institutions Code §827 prohibits disclosure of further information regarding juvenile suspects.

Participating agencies in Operation EBT Integrity include the Orange County District Attorney's Office Public Assistance Division, the Orange County Sheriff's Department, and the Police Departments of Cypress, Buena Park, La Habra, Irvine, Westminster, Fullerton, Brea, Newport Beach, Los Alamitos, Orange, Costa Mesa, Anaheim, Santa Ana, Fountain Valley, Seal Beach, Placentia, Tustin, Huntington Beach, Garden Grove, and La Palma. The United States Department of Agriculture – Office of the Inspector General assisted by providing victim information from the skimmed EBT cards. Homeland Security Investigations Division (HSI) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) assisted in identifying suspects.

"Throughout my time on the Orange County Board of Supervisors, I have developed a strong, collaborative relationship with our law enforcement agencies, in particular, the District Attorney's Office. We have a shared commitment to being tough on crime," said Don Wagner, Chairman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors. "I extend my deepest appreciation to District Attorney Todd Spitzer, his deputies, the Sheriff's Department, and every law enforcement officer who played a role in this success."

As a result of the success of Operation EBT Integrity and the training provided to law enforcement officers across Orange County by investigators from the District Attorney's Public Assistance Division, law enforcement agencies are continuing to target EBT fraud across Orange County.

"Our probation officers do a great job of actively supervising individuals on probation," said Orange County Probation Chief Daniel Hernandez. "Deputy Probation Officers Tyhe Bonchonsky and Denise Vega's discovery of a large cache of items during a probation search is indicative of their work ethic

and commitment to the community they serve. With the increase in these kinds of theft impacting our citizens, we are glad to be a part of bringing these perpetrators to justice.”

Charges filed by the Orange County District Attorney’s Office include:

Cristinel Dumitru, 31, of Huntington Beach, and Lorenzo Zarafu, 19, of Rowland Heights

Case # 23NF1925

- Charged with 41 felonies, including one count of second degree burglary, one count of accessing a card without consent, 30 counts of acquiring access to a card using different names, one count of grand theft, eight counts of unauthorized use of personal identifying information, and one infraction of driving without a valid driver’s license
- Maximum Sentence of 28 years and 4 months if convicted on all charges

Gani Iancu, 24 of Anaheim – Case # 23NF2179

- Charged with 51 felonies, including one count of grand theft, three counts of identity theft, 44 counts of acquiring access card account information, one felony count of possessing access card counterfeiting equipment, two felony counts of possession of forged documents and two misdemeanors including one count of possession of a scanning device used to access encoded information from payment cards, one count of false representation to a peace officer, and an infraction for driving without a valid license
- Possession of \$29,920 in cash at time of arrest
- Maximum sentence of 35 years if convicted of all charges

Alex Miclescu, 20 (no known address) – Case #23NF1932

- Charged with 50 felonies, including one count of grand theft, five counts of identity theft, 43 counts of acquiring access card account information, and one count of identity theft retaining information of 10 or more victims with the intent to defraud
- Possession of approximately \$27,000 in cash at time of arrest
- Maximum sentence of 34 years and 4 months if convicted of all charges

Mihai Olaru, 36 of Beverly Hills – Case #23WF2336

- Charged with 64 Felonies including 1 count of grand theft, 3 counts of identity theft, 1 count of identity theft retaining information of 10 or more victims with the intent to defraud, 59 counts of acquiring access card account information, and 1 misdemeanor count of resisting and obstructing an officer in the course of their duties

- Possession of \$34,210 cash at time of arrest
- Maximum sentence of 34 years, and 4 months if convicted of all charges

“The funds provided on Electronic Benefit Transfer, or EBT, cards support our most vulnerable residents. The loss of that money means our clients may not be able to purchase food for their families or pay rent, utility bills or medical costs,” said An Tran, Director of the County of Orange Social Services Agency. “We thank District Attorney Todd Spitzer for coordinating the effort across Orange County to prevent more individuals and families from becoming victims. If you think you were a victim of EBT theft, please call 800-281-9799.”

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