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Two Metro Mechanics, Three Others Charged in Conspiracy

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(June 30, 2004) It was a complicated scheme that was difficult for the Inspector General's office to penetrate, but the investigation led to the arrest, Tuesday, of two Metro mechanics and three others for conspiracy, theft and fraud.

Scheduled for arraignment in Los Angeles Superior Court, today, are Mechanic "A" Leader Jesus Soltero, 39, assigned to South Park; and Mechanic "A" David Watkins, 26, assigned to Carson Division 18.

Also to be arraigned are Watkins' father, Randall, and his brother, Daniel, along with Billy Joe Villigan. Watkins' father and son were mechanics and Villigan a service writer at Cerritos Pontiac/GMC/Buick. The three were fired when the alleged crimes were discovered.

The five men are charged with one count each of grand theft, conspiracy and fraudulently accessing computer systems.

Provided VIN numbers

According to Senior Investigator Brian O'Reilly of the Inspector General's Office, David Watkins provided vehicle identification numbers (VIN) of Metro-owned Chevrolet AstroVans to Villigan at the Cerritos dealership.

Villigan allegedly used the VIN numbers to create fraudulent work orders for repairs to the AstroVans, even though the vehicles were never brought into the shop. On the work orders, he indicated that the vehicles were still under General Motors warranty.

Villigan allegedly ordered new fuel pumps and assigned the repair work to Randall and Daniel Watkins. All repair work and parts were charged against the GM warranty program.

The fuel pumps – with a total value of about \$3,000 – then were given to David Watkins and Soltero who installed them in AstroVans being repaired at Metro's South Park division, the investigator said.

Three earned commissions

The investigation found that Randall and Daniel Watkins and Villigan earned \$50 to \$60 commissions from GM for their apparent work. The scheme also ensured that David Watkins and Soltero had a ready supply of fuel pumps and could avoid using their department's budget to draw the parts from the Metro supply system.

A warranty administrator at the Cerritos dealership discovered an unusual pattern of warranty claims and contacted the dealership's security agent. The agent contacted a Metro executive who alerted the Inspector General's office. The scheme was operating for at least three months in early 2003, O'Reilly said.

O'Reilly and Deputy Inspector General Mimi Strauss credited Deputy District Attorney Juliet Schmidt with appreciating the seriousness of the alleged criminal acts and issuing a complaint that resulted in arrest warrants for the five suspects.

The arrest warrants for the five suspects were executed Tuesday morning by investigators assigned to the Los Angeles DA's Public Integrity Division.

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