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### **Mercer County Prosecutor Announces Charges Against 12 Individuals in Elaborate Fraudulent Housing Scheme**

**TRENTON** – Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo J. Onofri announced today that 12 individuals have been charged in an elaborate countywide housing scam in which numerous foreclosed and vacant homes were being occupied unlawfully.

The nationwide issue has been plaguing Mercer County towns for several years. In 2016, Trenton and county officials formed the Fraudulent Housing Occupancy Task Force and held multiple meetings to discuss the problem. A press conference was held in October 2016 to warn residents about the scam. Ewing Township held community meetings to raise awareness, and then Hamilton and Lawrence began reporting similar issues. In the late fall of 2017, the Mercer County Prosecutor's Economic Crime Unit (ECU) held a meeting with municipal police to discuss the magnitude of the problem and different approaches to combat it. At that time, the same names and techniques started to emerge, and ECU Detective Zachary Ortman was placed in charge of creating a uniform approach, and developing tools and resources to address the issue from a county perspective.

"This was a massive, complex investigative and legal undertaking," Prosecutor Onofri said. "Detectives spent countless hours conducting surveillance, studying the eviction process and adverse possession, and combing through social media in order to obtain crucial evidence that allowed them to connect the dots and identify the many scam artists involved."

Different variations of the scheme were discovered, but they all had commonalities. Scammers were locating vacant homes - either foreclosed, for sale or abandoned properties - and breaking in. They would change the locks, illegally turn on utilities, create fake lease documents, and move in themselves or rent the properties out to unsuspecting individuals. When property managers or bank inspectors would stop by the houses to examine or show them, they would find occupants in what should have been vacant homes and notify local police.

“These are brazen criminals who educated themselves on squatters’ rights and took advantage of the civil court process,” Prosecutor Onofri said. “This created a challenge for local police who were being called out to the homes. Occupants were providing legal-looking leases and cash receipts for rent, and there would be conflicting versions of who had the right to be there.”

In some instances, illegal occupants were even receiving “cash for keys” payments, where a bank would pay the inhabitant to leave the property rather than go through the eviction process in civil court. Such payments could be anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, but ultimately cost the bank or real estate agency less than hiring attorneys to handle the matter in court, which could take as long as three months.

“Thanks to the collaborative efforts of our police departments in Mercer County, we were able to identify multiple individuals that moved from squatting in one town to another. We were also able to identify those individuals involved in a more sophisticated rental scheme,” Prosecutor Onofri said. “In light of the rampant scams that were being committed, this office took an aggressive charging position in Mercer County.”

“I am pleased with the outcome of this investigation,” Ewing Police Chief John Stemler III said. “It was a team effort between the Mercer County Prosecutor’s Office, Hamilton police and our Community Response Unit that led to the arrest of those running a housing scam effecting every township in the county. Residents should still remain vigilant and report suspicious activity with unoccupied houses to the local police department.”

In Hamilton Township, police investigated approximately 50 incidents in a 14-month period. “I appreciate the coordinated effort of the Mercer County Prosecutor’s Office and all agencies involved in addressing this nationwide problem,” Hamilton Police Chief James W. Collins said.

Detectives identified 48-year-old Barbara Brooks as the leader of the ring. Brooks located the foreclosed and vacant properties, produced fake “leases,” and recruited and instructed others on the ins-and-outs of the complex process, including what to say to

police when they showed up at the door. Brooks enlisted Michael Wilmore, a Trenton Water Works employee, to turn on the water supply to the numerous properties.

Prosecutor Onofri cited a property on Sabrina Drive in Ewing as one of the more egregious examples of the scam. Defendant Latasha Love lived rent-free in the foreclosed home for months. After being arrested by police, she moved into a home in Princeton, but told Rasheeda Harris to move in and take over the “lease” in Ewing. Love was arrested again trying to move back in a second time, and at some point was allegedly paid to leave the Sabrina Drive residence by the real estate agency,

The following 12 defendants were all arrested and charged during the course of the investigation with burglary, theft of services, failure to make lawful disposition and criminal mischief. The charges relate to properties in Ewing, Hamilton, Lawrence and Princeton townships, most of which were bank owned.

- Barbara Brooks, age 48/Trenton, alleged ring leader
- Michael Wilmore, age 44/Florence, Trenton Water Works employee
- Latasha Love, age 32/Ewing
- Rasheeda Harris, age 32/Hamilton
- Endiya Thompson, age 21/Sicklerville
- Jamar Hill, age 37/Hamilton
- Shea Lightfoot, age 38/Willingboro
- Dominique Morgan, age 31/Hamilton
- Tarrik Boles, age 36/Hamilton
- Shauntee Stokes, age 40/Trenton
- Sandra Freeman, age 49/Hamilton
- Eddie Thompson, age 45/Trenton

Love is charged similarly in Yardley, Pa.

All of the defendants were charged and released pending future court appearances. The charges are third- and fourth-degree offenses. A third-degree crime carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a fine of \$15,000.

Earlier this week, the prosecutor’s ECU additionally charged Love with perjury, theft by deception and other falsifying complaints. She was initially arrested and charged in Princeton for occupying a home on Lawrenceville Road. On April 1, 2018, the property manager contacted Princeton police to inform them that the residence was occupied, but no one should be in the residence. Police arrived to find Love in the residence again. She presented police with an order signed by a judge and verified as a real order. ECU looked into it further and found that Love filed a motion with the court against a real estate

agent who was previously the listing agent. She created a fraudulent lease using the name of the previous owner as the renter, and provided false information in the motion and again on the record in court.

Prosecutor Onofri urged real estate and property management companies to call their local police when someone is inside a foreclosed or real-estate-owned property. “There is a misconception that owners need to go through the eviction process when there is an occupant unlawfully inside,” he said. “That holds true when a tenant has a valid lease; then the eviction process must be followed. Without a valid lease, the situation becomes criminal.”

The arrests are the result of an investigation lead by Detectives Zachary Ortman and David Petelle of the Mercer County Prosecutor’s Economic Crime Unit, under the supervision of Sgt. Joe Angarone and Sgt. Eric Hastings, with assistance from Officers Danielle Bethea, Kevin Hoarn, Michael Pellegrino, Matt Przemieniecki, Sgt. Michael Flynn, Lt. Jeff Caldwell, Capt. Rocco Maruca of the Ewing Police Department, under the direction of Chief John Stemler III, and Detectives Matthew Bagley, Thomas Clugsten, Scott Marshall, Christopher Pullen, Salvatore Vaccaro, Det. Sgt. Joseph Wilk, of the Hamilton Police Division, under the direction of Chief James W. Collins.

Prosecutor Onofri also thanked the following law enforcement agencies and all of their members who provided support and resources:

- Lawrence Township Police Department
- Princeton Police Department
- Trenton Police Department
- Mercer County Sheriff’s Office
- U.S. Marshals Service NY/NJ Regional Fugitive Task Force

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant Prosecutor Rachel Cook, chief of the Mercer County Prosecutor’s Economic Crime Unit.

Despite having been charged, every defendant is presumed innocent until found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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