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IMMEDIATE

MTA Police, Nassau DA Rice & Nassau Police Announce Arrests in Investigation of LIRR Ticket Vending Machine Scam

Round-the-Clock Stakeout and Cyber-Forensics Result in Four Arrests; Investigation Is Ongoing with Cooperation of Banks and U.S. Secret Service

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority Police Department, Nassau County District Attorney Kathleen Rice, Queens District Attorney's Office and Nassau County Police Department Crimes Against Property (CAP) Squad today announced the arrests of four people in connection with a scam discovered two weeks ago that used hidden cameras and bank card "skimmers" to target MTA Long Island Rail Road customers using ticket vending machines (TVMs) at locations in Nassau and Queens counties.

Cameras and skimmers have also been discovered on Metro-North Railroad TVMs in Chappaqua, Westchester County, and investigators are continuing to search for more scamming devices to determine the full scope of the scam.

Seized evidence includes thousands of debit and credit card numbers of Nassau, Queens and Westchester residents, many of which come from compromised TVMs. Skipped debit card account numbers, PIN numbers and credit card numbers are being analyzed to see to what extent they were used to steal money from people's accounts and financial institutions. So far, one bank has reported thousands of dollars of losses on over 50 accounts.

Investigators have been in contact with banks to notify them of the scam so that they can notify their customers and verify losses. MTA officials warned customers of the scam on October 18 and have since checked all 278 TVMs in the LIRR system to verify there are no cameras or skimmers in place and will continue checks on an ongoing basis.

An initial precautionary check of all 277 TVMs in the Metro-North system found no cameras or skimmers, but three were later found at the Chappaqua station on a subsequent check. Both railroads are continuing to check all their TVMs at 115 LIRR stations and 95 Metro-North stations in case more scam devices are placed there.

A husband and wife were arrested Monday night when they were observed retrieving two skimmer devices and two hidden cameras from TVMs at the Sea Cliff LIRR station, not knowing that MTA Police had been secretly watching the station for more than 72 hours. Further investigation led to an apartment in Elmhurst, Queens, where MTA Police arrested two men believed to be technicians and managers of the scam and began, with the assistance of NCPD CAP Squad, analyzing computer equipment to further understand the scope of the scam.

"Our officers did incredible work in cracking this case, and this investigation remains very active as we evaluate a wealth of evidence seized so far," said MTA Police Chief Michael Coan. "Working closely with our law enforcement partners from the Nassau County District Attorney's Office, the Queens District Attorney's Office and the Nassau County Police Department, MTA Police detectives stopped this fraud in its tracks and prevented it from victimizing even more innocent people. Anyone who has used a bank card at an LIRR or Metro-North TVM in the past three months should immediately check for any unauthorized activity on their accounts."

"Ticket vending machines are a source of convenience for thousands of people who take the railroad every single day, but unfortunately those machines have become a source of convenience and opportunity for a crew of brazen thieves targeting commuters," DA Rice said. "While law enforcement agencies like ours continue to work together to rein in this scam entirely, customers should raise their alertness at machines, try to use cash or credit cards when possible, and notify authorities immediately of any problems."

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown said, "Identity theft is a financial plague afflicting millions of victims and costing billions of dollars in losses to consumers, businesses and financial institutions. In this particular case, the defendants were allegedly amassing the personal identifying information of unwitting commuters. This case should serve as a reminder that people should periodically check their credit reports, as well as their credit and debit card statements, to ensure that their personal information has not been accessed by criminals."

"While we are grateful to the MTA Police for their quick work on this case, we must advise customers to be extra vigilant when using their credit or debit cards. Always safeguard your personal information like your PIN number and report any suspicious activity," said Helena E. Williams, LIRR President. "LIRR crews are also on alert, checking to make sure our ticket vending machines are safe to use."

The pinhole cameras used in the scam were hidden inside black metal strips custom-molded to look like a standard part of the TVM and mounted above the keypad for entering PIN codes and the slot where bank cards are inserted. MTA Police and the LIRR's TVM crews inspected all 278 machines and found nine devices installed at the Sea Cliff, Bayside, Great Neck, Merillon Avenue, and Greenvale stations. MTA Police and Nassau PD Crimes Against Property Squad detectives used specialized cyber-forensics to analyze the cameras and learn how they worked, in conjunction with plastic skimmers placed over the bank card slots to capture information from their magnetic stripes.

MTA Police arrested Valer Zaharia, 38, and his wife Teodora Zaharia, 27, at the Sea Cliff station in Nassau County on Monday evening and arraigned them the next day. District Attorney Rice has charged them with Identity Theft in the Second Degree, an E felony; Criminal Possession of Forgery Devices, a D felony; and Unlawful Possession of a Skimmer Device in the Second Degree, an A misdemeanor. They are being held without bail and were scheduled to be in court today in Part 9L in Mineola. They face a maximum sentence of seven years if convicted.

Working with the Nassau DA's Office, Nassau Police CAP Squad obtained two search warrants and MTA Police obtained an additional search warrant for an apartment in Elmhurst, Queens, where Tuesday night they arrested Mr. Niculae Petre, 45, and Mr. Dorin Husa, 37. District Attorney Brown has charged them with Criminal Possession of a Forged Instrument in the second degree; Criminal Possession of Forgery Devices, and Unlawful Possession of Personal Identification Information in the second degree. They were arraigned on Oct. 30. Petre is being held on \$50,000 bond. Husa is being held on \$35,000 bond. They face a maximum sentence of seven years in prison if convicted.

All defendants are Romanian nationals – three with visas and one undocumented – who face deportation if convicted.

The Elmhurst apartment appeared to be a virtual factory for creating materials to steal bank card information and use it to steal money from people's bank accounts. The search yielded thousands of stolen debit and credit card numbers, a variety of paraphernalia that could be used to tamper with bank cards and commit bank card fraud, including cameras, skimmers, plastic molds, memory cards, flash drives, computers, cash and credit cards. Two of the flash drives containing account numbers were found in a toilet.

A recovered safe contained hundreds of gift cards and other magnetic cards re-encoded with stolen account numbers as well as other records of stolen account numbers and a card reader/writer. MTA Police, Nassau Police, District Attorney Rice and District Attorney Brown are working with the U.S. Secret Service to further analyze the seized material and determine the scope of the fraudulent activity.

The LIRR has launched a customer education campaign with a video, posters and literature on train seats, urging customers to safeguard personal information like PIN numbers when using ticket vending machines. Anyone who believes their personal information may have been compromised at an LIRR or MTA Metro-North Railroad TVM should contact the MTA Police at 718-361-2201.

To guard against potential fraud, anyone who uses TVMs should follow these important tips from the Better Business Bureau and District Attorney Rice to safeguard personal information:

- Beware of suspicious activity or individuals at or around TVMs, and walk away if you notice anyone watching you or if something seems suspicious about the TVM itself.
- When entering your PIN, stand close to the machine and use your other hand or an object to block the view of the keypad.
- Review your account statements regularly to check for unauthorized withdrawals or purchases.
- Never keep a written copy of your PIN in your wallet or purse.

The case is being handled for the Nassau DA's Office by ADA Matthew Sotirhos and ADA April Montgomery under the supervision of Diane Peress of the Economic Crimes Bureau.

The case is being handled for the by MTA Police Department by Dets. Brian Longaro and Edward Russell under the supervision of Det. Sgt. James Flanagan.

The case was handled for the NCPD CAP Squad by Dets. Jeffrey Marshall and Ronald Rispoli under the supervision of Det. Sgt. Richard Harasym.

The case is being handled in Queens under the supervision of Chief Gregory Pavlides and Deputy Chief Hanophy of the District Attorney's Economic Crimes Bureau.

The charges are merely accusations and the defendants are presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.