



Boynton Beach Police Department Office of Media Relations

G. Matthew Immler, Chief of Police

Police: Clerks allowed customers to use EBT cards to get cash, buy beer

They are issued by the Department of Children and Families to help parents struggling to put food on the table.

But people are using the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards to buy beer and cigarettes and get cash that is often used to buy drugs.

And it's costing Palm Beach County taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

Today, Boynton Beach Police served search warrants at four convenience stores in the city that fraudulently gave cash to undercover officers using fictitious EBT cards. They also arrested four store owners and employees on the charge of public assistance fraud, a third degree felony if the amount of fraud was more than \$200 in 12 consecutive months. More arrests are expected.

The fictitious EBT cards were provided by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Public Assistance Fraud Unit, which assisted the Boynton Beach Police Department's Community Action Team and the Community Redevelopment Agency Police Unit with the five-month investigation. The investigation, dubbed Operation Meal Ticket, was prompted by information from actual EBT cardholders who told police that they were able to go into a convenience store, and for a fee, get cash from the cards. These cards, which are regulated by the Florida Department of Children and Families, are food stamps that can only be used to buy food. While some EBT cards do have cash benefits, none of these people were in possession of cards that were eligible for it.

During the investigation, an undercover officer went into a convenience store and handed the clerk a fictitious EBT card. The undercover officer asked for a certain dollar amount, for example \$40, and the clerk would tell them there was a \$40 fee. The clerk swiped the EBT card for \$80 and gave \$40 to the "customer" and pocketed the other \$40. The card was then returned to the undercover officer. Police were able to conduct 68 fraudulent transactions worth \$4,000 at five convenience stores in five months.

Those stores are:

- EZ Mart – 1005 N. Seacrest Boulevard
- Palm Food & Beverage – 103 E. Boynton Beach Boulevard
- Kwik Stop – 1305 S. Federal Highway
- First Stop Foods – 2755 S. Federal Highway
- Stop-N-Go – 1461 W. Boynton Beach Boulevard (search warrant not served at this location)

Police believe about half of all EBT transactions at these locations are fraudulent. The cost to taxpayers is more than \$100,000. Police have also identified nearly 100 people who have committed fraud by using the EBT cards to obtain cash and expect to file charges on them for public assistance fraud in the near future.

The names of those arrested today will be made available to you later this afternoon. For more information: <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/access/ebt/index.shtml>

www.dcf.state.fl.us/programs/access/foodstamps.shtml

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