



MEDIA RELEASE

Investigative Unit

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Investigative Unit Targets Food Assistance Fraud

The majority of the people using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) are following the rules; some in Ohio are not.

That is why the Ohio Investigative Unit (OIU) investigates retail establishments that may be abusing the system. Undercover, fully-sworn peace officers from OIU are specifically assigned by the United States Department of Agriculture to investigate possible fraudulent activities by Ohio retailers. This could include purchasing benefits from recipients, often for less than their value, or allowing ineligible purchases.

Many times the agents work alongside partner agencies from municipalities, state and federal government. Over the last three years, OIU agents have investigated 461 food assistance fraud cases in Ohio. Individuals convicted of defrauding the SNAP program can be banned for life from collecting food assistance, fined up to \$250,000 and sent to jail for up to 20 years.

“Unfortunately, there are retailers that are taking advantage of the program,” said OIU Agent-in-Charge Eric Wolf. “Often we find those places that are participating in food stamp fraud, are often involved in other crimes.”

Together, OIU and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) are reminding Ohioans of what is eligible and what is not, and who to contact if they believe violations may be occurring.

Items not eligible include: beer, wine, liquor, cigarettes, tobacco, pet foods, soaps, paper products, household supplies, vitamins, medicines, hot foods and food that will be eaten in the store.

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Eligible purchases include: breads and cereals; fruits and vegetables; meats, fish and poultry; dairy products; and seeds and plants which produce food.

Anyone who believes fraud may be occurring is urged to contact the Ohio Investigative Unit at #677 or by calling toll-free 877-4MINORS.

ODJFS distributes more than \$2.98 billion in SNAP benefits annually to about 1.9 million Ohioans, more than half of them children. In Ohio, recipients use an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card – The Ohio Direction Card – to buy allowable food items. Although the federal government pays for all benefits, states provide about half of the program's administrative costs.

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The Ohio Investigative Unit agents are plain-clothed fully sworn peace officers. OIU is charged with enforcing the state's liquor laws and is the only state law enforcement agency specifically tasked with investigating food stamp fraud crimes. Agents also investigate tobacco violations.

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