

## COMMUNITY

# MEDICAID SCAMS: ARAB AMERICANS IN THE HOTSEAT



BY RACHEL MILLARD

New York, N.Y. — Scores of New York Arab Americans are currently being investigated for Medicaid Fraud, according to a source familiar with their cases.

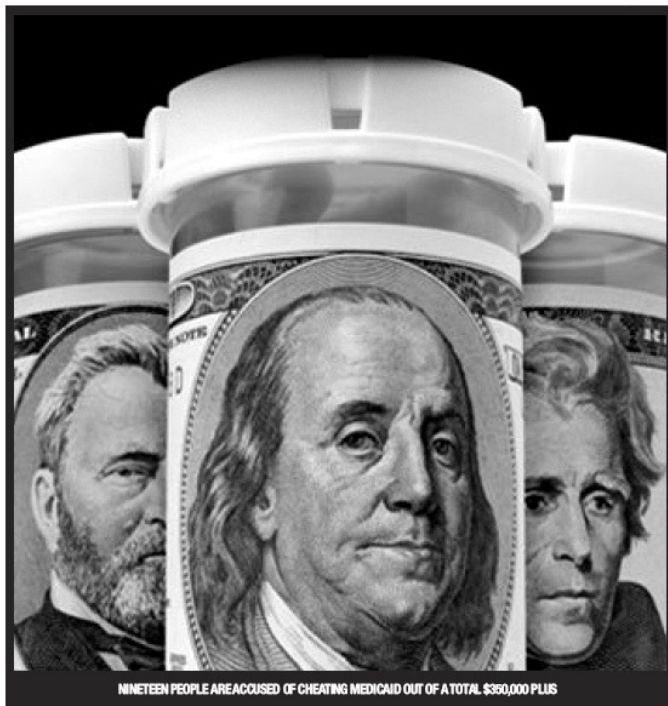
The source said that those individuals recently received letters from the New York Human Resource Administration Bureau of Fraud Investigation (BFI), calling them in for an interview to answer suspicions of lying on their Medicaid applications in order to qualify for the state-subsidized health insurance.

If the suspicions are true, those individuals could be ordered to pay back thousands of dollars in Medicaid and healthcare bills, face prison sentences or even deportation.

Roughly two million New Yorkers currently receive Medicaid, which is meant for people who can't afford health insurance. The threshold to qualify for Medicaid starts at \$10,830 annual income for a single adult, who must also have no more than \$13,800 in assets.

The news comes as 19 individuals were charged by the Manhattan District Attorney on October 29 with fraudulently collecting Medicaid benefits totaling more than \$350,000.

Two of the accused, Ibrahim A. and Farhad L., were charged with collecting \$23,015.46 and



NINETEEN PEOPLE ARE ACCUSED OF CHEATING MEDICAID OUT OF A TOTAL \$350,000 PLUS

\$6,118.09 respectively in public health insurance benefits between 2008 and 2009. Both men allegedly falsely claimed to live in Manhattan and hid thousand of dollars worth of income. They have both been charged with Grand Larceny in the third degree, among other charges.

Maha Attieh, Health Enrollment Manager at Brooklyn's Arab American Family Support Center, where she helps over 1,000 people apply for Medicaid and Family Health Plus each year, said it's vital that

everyone is 100% honest on their applications, which are self-authenticating.

"Everything must be declared," she said. "All income, bank accounts or resources—cars, property, etc."

But she agreed that honest mistakes can be made. "The forms are complicated, especially for non-native English speakers, and enrollers are not always trained to ask the right questions," she said.

Fraudulent practices also include loaning one's Medicaid card to a friend, reselling Medicaid-obtained

medicines, or getting services for which one is ineligible.

## 'Severe' Consequences

A spokeswoman for the BFI said that the agency investigates 5,000 cases of Medicaid fraud each year, and that each case is different in terms of what information the agency has before it calls someone in for an interview and how the case is settled.

Attorney Todd Spodek, whose firm Storobin & Spodek LLP specializes in Medicaid Fraud defense,

## "NYC's Medicaid fraud unit conducts 5000 investigations every year"

said that cases can be settled administratively at the interview stage. "The investigators may offer you a chance to avoid prosecution and work out a feasible payment agreement with them," he said.

"The investigators are people as well, and they understand the situation. They have no interest in making you homeless just so you can pay back the premiums," he said.

But if a settlement is not reached, criminal charges may be brought by the local District Attorney's Office. In that case, the consequences can be severe: One can be accused of several felonies including grand larceny, false filing and health care fraud. As well as hefty fines, an individual can be barred from receiving Medicaid, get a criminal record, and possibly serve prison time. Finally, a criminal conviction can affect non-citizens' immigration status.

Spodek recommends that anyone under investigation seeks legal advice before going to the interview.

"If not, the individual may well go to the interview, confess to a crime, and provide much more information than is necessary," Spodek said. "Any information you provide will be used against you."

"You don't have to an-

swer the questions asked by the investigator, and if you choose not to your benefits can not be stopped solely on your choice not to answer," he said. Moreover, Arabic interpretation must be provided if needed.

## 'Most Cases Are Tip Offs': Investigator

A separate source at the BFI, speaking anonymously due to not having been authorized to speak to the press, said that investigations might be triggered by regular random checks conducted by the office, but that most cases are the result of tips to the office's fraud hotline.

"We get hundreds of callers every week alleging that their neighbor or colleague is committing Medicaid fraud," the source said. "And we investigate every call."

"If we get a tip, we do a thorough check of all the available records—bank accounts, ownership titles etc.—and look at other evidence before calling someone in for an interview," the source said.

"We've had calls from Arab Americans saying that other community members have assets abroad while collecting Medicaid here, which is illegal, although we can't prove it," the source said.