



718.286.6000
WWW.QUEENSDA.ORG

QUEENS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY
125-01 QUEENS BOULEVARD
KEW GARDENS, NEW YORK 11415-1568



MELINDA KATZ
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
MONDAY, APRIL 1, 2024

CONTACT: PRESS OFFICE 718 286-6315
QDACommunications@queensda.org

AIRPORT TAXI DISPATCHERS CHARGED WITH TAKING BRIBES

*Payoffs Were to Allow Drivers to Pick Up Arriving Passengers at JFK Without Waiting in Line
Defendants Worked for Private Contractor*

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced that nine taxi dispatchers were arraigned today on bribery charges for taking cash in exchange for letting drivers pick up passengers at Kennedy International Airport without waiting behind fellow cabbies in often long lines at the central dispatch lot. Four of the defendants are accused of accepting more than \$1,000 in bribes and are charged with first-degree commercial bribe receiving, a felony.

District Attorney Katz said: “The victims of corruption, without fail, are honest, hardworking men and women. As if the challenges of making a living as a yellow cab driver were not already enough, the cabbies at JFK had to overcome greed and corruption in their effort to put food on the table for themselves and their families. We will not allow that to stand. My office conducted a lengthy and in-depth investigation into these allegations and will hold the corrupt accountable.”

Port Authority Inspector General John Gay said: “The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has zero tolerance for anyone, including individuals working for private contractors, who seek to abuse their positions for private gain and enrich themselves at the expense of the hard-working people who provide services to our airport customers. We thank the Queens District Attorney’s Office and our law enforcement partners for working with us to root out these contractor employees who improperly seek to gain from others, and bring them to justice.”

Taxi & Limousine Commissioner David Do said: “I’d like to thank District Attorney Katz, the Port Authority, and our own dedicated Enforcement officers, who assisted in cracking down on this reprehensible bribery scheme. More than 90 percent of our drivers are immigrants, and many of them came here to avoid exactly this kind of corruption in their native lands. Public safety and playing by the rules are precursors for prosperity, and that goes for drivers, too. Any time we learn of drivers bribing dispatchers or operating illegally, we will move to revoke their licenses.”

The nine defendants (see addendum) were arraigned today in Queens County Criminal Court on complaints charging them with second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities. The four defendants accused of accepting more than \$1,000 in bribes were

additionally charged with first-degree commercial bribe receiving, a felony. An arrest warrant has been obtained for a 10th dispatcher, who is now being sought.

The defendants are employees of a subcontractor retained by the Port Authority, which operates the airport.

Taxi dispatchers at JFK regulate the movement of yellow cabs from a central holding lot to the various terminal pick-up areas in order to ensure both that arriving passengers have access to taxis and that terminal frontages do not become overly congested. The taxis are released from the holding area in the order in which they arrived at the lot. At the terminal pick-up location, the dispatcher on site maintains the same sequence when directing a fare to a specific taxi.

According to the charges:

- In 2022, the Port Authority received complaints alleging that some taxi dispatchers at JFK were taking bribes to allow yellow cab drivers to pick up arriving passengers at terminals without first waiting in the central taxi holding lot.
- After a preliminary review, the Port Authority's Office of the Inspector General and the Queens District Attorney's Airport Investigations Unit launched a probe.
- The joint investigation found that between January 2022 and February 2024, the defendants accepted a total of over \$12,000 in bribes via cash, Zelle, or CashApp payments.
- The bribes were accepted in small increments, often \$5 to \$10 per trip.
- Eight of the defendants were arrested on March 12 when they showed up at JFK for what they believed was a training session. The ninth defendant was arrested separately on March 27. They all received Desk Appearance Tickets at the time of their arrest.

The investigation was conducted by Detectives Nicholas Ciancarelli and Luis Santibanez of the PAOIG, under the supervision of Mia Chang, Supervising Confidential Investigator.

Assistant District Attorney Sean Murphy and Senior Deputy Chief Catherine Kane of the District Attorney's Major Economic Crimes Bureau, Airport Investigations Unit, are prosecuting the case, under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney Mary Lowenburg, Bureau Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Gerard Brave.

Criminal complaints and indictments are accusations. A defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

#

ADDENDUM

ADRIAN GRULLON, 32 of Brooklyn, is charged with first degree commercial bribe receiving, second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities, for accepting

bribes on 128 occasions totaling \$2,560. If convicted, he faces up to a 1 and 1/3 to 4 years in jail. His next court date is May 8.

YOLANDA RODRIGUEZ, 67, of Laurelton, Queens, is charged with first degree commercial bribe receiving, second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities, for accepting bribes on 91 occasions totaling \$1,851. If convicted, she faces up to a 1 and 1/3 to 4 years in jail. Her next court date is June 5.

JOVANE JOHNSON, 21, of Jamaica, Queens, is charged with first degree commercial bribe receiving, second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities, for accepting bribes on 85 occasions totaling \$1,175. If convicted, he faces up to a 1 and 1/3 to 4 years in jail. His next court date is May 13.

JOSEPH WOODWARD, 56, of Brooklyn, is charged with first degree commercial bribe receiving, second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities, for accepting bribes on 60 occasions totaling \$1,296. If convicted, he faces up to a 1 and 1/3 to 4 years in jail. His next court date is June 5.

SAEED AHMED, 61 of Ozone Park, Queens is charged with second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities for accepting bribes on 18 occasions. If convicted, he faces up to a year in jail. His next court date is June 5.

GEORGE BROWN, 39, of Jamaica, Queens, is charged with second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities for accepting 14 bribes. If convicted, he faces up to a year in jail. Brown's next court date is April 11 for appointment of counsel.

TUWAYNE COLEY, 22, of Jamaica, Queens, is charged with second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities for accepting 14 bribes. If convicted, he faces up to a year in jail. Coley's next court date is April 11 for appointment of counsel.

JAIRO SARMIENTO, 23, of New Hyde Park, Queens, is charged with second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities for accepting 8 bribes. If convicted, he faces up to a year in jail. His next court date is June 5.

SATESH SOOKLALL, 34 of Jamaica, Queens is charged with second-degree commercial bribe receiving, official misconduct and receiving unlawful gratuities for accepting a bribe. If convicted, he faces up to a year in jail. His next court date is June 5.

#

Note to Editors: Archived press releases are available at www.queensda.org.

