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**FIVE INDICTED FOR STEALING DEATH BENEFITS FROM UNION MEMBERS
AND THEIR NEXT OF KIN**

*Former Union Worker Accused of Filing Bogus Beneficiary Forms on at Least Eight Different Occasions,
Recruited Four Others to Cash Checks and Keep Portion for Themselves;
Co-defendants Extradited from Florida to Face Charges*

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced today that five defendants have been indicted on charges of grand larceny and other crimes for allegedly stealing thousands of dollars in death benefits that had been intended for the beneficiaries of United Service Workers Union Local 74 workers. The alleged leader, Catherine Wenzell-Reyes, worked at the union for 12 years and is accused of submitting bogus forms to a life insurance company with the names of her co-defendants as the intended benefit recipients as early as December 2017 in order to pocket the money.

DA Katz said: “Hard working union members trusted that their life insurance policy would be paid out to their grieving loved ones upon their death. Instead, union worker Catherin Wenzell-Reyes and her codefendants allegedly engineered a stolen death benefit scheme and routed money not to the union members’ intended recipients, but to line their own pockets. I thank the victims for courageously coming forward as we work to hold the defendants responsible for the alleged criminal conduct.”

The five defendants were named in a 55-count indictment variously charging them with grand larceny in the second and third degrees, criminal possession of stolen property in the second and third degrees, falsifying business records in the first degree, conspiracy in the fourth and fifth degrees, criminal possession of a forged instrument in the third degree and scheme to defraud in the second degree. (See addendum)

Two of the defendants were extradited from Florida and arraigned on the indictment today before Supreme Court Justice Gary Miret. They were ordered to return to court on October 28. A co-defendant is expected to be extradited and arraigned next week.

The alleged mastermind, Catherine Wenzell-Reyes, is expected to be arraigned on the indictment on September 20.

Another co-defendant is expected to be arraigned on September 12 and one other is still being sought. According to the charges:

- USWU Local 74, located at 36-36 33rd Street in Long Island City, represents service workers including school employees and cemetery workers.

- While Catherine Wenzell-Reyes was employed at Local 74 between December 2017 and February 2022, she was tasked with processing members' life insurance policies. Once a member died, she submitted life insurance forms to the insurance company. The form specified the beneficiary listed by the union member as the intended recipient. The insurance company then paid out the benefit via check in the beneficiary's name.
- In April 2022, the next of kin of a deceased union member reached out to the Queens District Attorney's Office with concerns regarding the member's life insurance policy.
- The victim said that her brother, who worked as a custodian at a Long Island school district and died in 2021, had listed her as the beneficiary on his policy but the insurance company had paid out the benefit to a stranger. The victim further stipulated that the fraudulent claim form was submitted to the insurance company prior to the member's death certificate being received by the family.
- An investigation was launched into the matter by the District Attorney's Frauds Bureau.
- Evidence gathered revealed that on at least seven different occasions between 2017 and 2022, defendant Wenzell-Reyes allegedly submitted fraudulent documents to the insurance company that did not list the intended beneficiary named by the union members when they originally filled out the form.
- Eight death benefit checks were issued to the five co-defendants, who were unknown to the deceased members or their families.
- In one instance, a co-defendant received a death benefit check in the amount of \$30,000. Upon cashing the check, the co-defendant split \$3,000 with a conspirator via a CashApp transaction and gave \$27,000 to Wenzell-Reyes.
- The total amount that was paid out, over eight different cases for seven deceased members, is approximately \$181,900.

The investigation was conducted by Detective Investigator Anthony F. Guerriero under the supervision of Lieutenant William Negus and Sergeant Thomas J. Rouse of the NYPD Queens DA Squad and by Queens DA investigative accountant Silvana Sutich under the supervision of Queens DA senior forensic accountant Joseph Plonski.

Assistant District Attorney Christine Thambuswamy of the District Attorney's Frauds Bureau is prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Joseph Conley, Bureau Chief, Hana Kim, Deputy 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

CATHERINE WENZELL-REYES aka Cathy Reyes, 36, of Woodside, Queens, is charged with grand larceny in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, three counts of grand larceny in the third degree, three counts of criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree, falsifying business records in the first degree, conspiracy in the fourth degree, three counts of conspiracy in the fifth degree, two counts of criminal possession of a forged instrument in the third degree and scheme to defraud in the second degree. Wenzell-Reyes was arrested by members of the Queens DA Detectives Bureau on March 14, 2023. She is expected to be arraigned on the indictment on September 20. If convicted of the top count, Wenzell-Reyes faces up to 5 to 15 years in prison.

DAMARIS CUADRADO, 37, of Ridgewood, Queens, is charged with grand larceny in the third degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and conspiracy in the fifth degree. Cuadrado, a named beneficiary who allegedly received one of the fraudulently obtained payouts, was arrested by members of the Queens DA Detectives Bureau on July 17, 2023. She is expected to be arraigned on the indictment September 12. If convicted of the top count, Cuadrado faces up to 2 1/3 to 7 years in prison.

CARMEN RIVERA, 57, of Sanford, Florida, is charged with grand larceny in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, two counts of grand larceny in the third degree, two counts of criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree, conspiracy in the fourth degree, two counts of conspiracy in the fifth degree and scheme to defraud in the second degree. Rivera was arrested by members of local law enforcement in Florida on September 4. She was extradited to Queens County on September 10. If convicted of the top count, Rivera faces up to 5 to 15 years in prison.

MACEY DIAZ, 24, of Sanford, Florida, is charged with grand larceny in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, conspiracy in the fourth degree and scheme to defraud in the second degree. Diaz – *Rivera's daughter* – was arrested by members of local law enforcement in Florida on September 4. She was extradited to Queens County on September 10. If convicted of the top count, Diaz faces up to 5 to 15 years in prison.

MICHAEL DIAZ, 36, of St. Cloud, Florida, is charged with grand larceny in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, conspiracy in the fourth degree and scheme to defraud in the second degree. Diaz – *Rivera's son* – was arrested by members of local law enforcement in Florida on September 4. He is expected to be extradited to Queens County and arraigned next week. If convicted of the top count, Diaz faces up to 5 to 15 years in prison.

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