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He scammed public programs out of more than \$300,000, MN charges say

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Here's how authorities say it worked: Elfonzo Dyrell Shelby sent phony surveys to inmates at a correctional facility in Mississippi.

In exchange for filling them out, the North Dakota man promised each \$45. Then he used the information to apply for government benefits that he pocketed.



Elfonzo Dyrell Shelby

That was just one of the tactics Shelby, 47, deployed in a “widespread and complex” fraud scheme that scammed public assistance programs out of more than \$300,000, according to information released Thursday by the Ramsey County attorney’s office.

Shelby used both fake and actual identities to scam the Minnesota Department of Human Services general assistance and food stamp programs in Ramsey, Hennepin and Renville counties for more than six years, Ramsey County authorities say.

The county attorney’s investigation produced amended charges against Shelby. Previously charged in May with two counts of fraudulent application of public-assistance benefit cards, he now faces charges of felony-level identify theft and theft by swindle.

His public defender, Terrance Hendricks, could not be immediately reached for comment on the matter.

Shelby pleaded not guilty to the charges during a hearing Thursday afternoon. His case is now headed toward trial.

“This complicated and widespread fraud scheme of our public benefit programs was uncovered thanks to the dedicated fraud investigators in the Ramsey County Attorney’s Office, who then worked in partnership with other public agencies, including law enforcement from both Minnesota and North Dakota to make these charges possible,” Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said in a written statement about the case provided to media.

“This investigation is still ongoing, and we will continue our dedicated efforts to follow through on other investigations of suspicious activities within our public benefit programs,” Choi wrote.

Thursday’s charges were the culmination of months of investigation, which included the execution of three search warrants, the county attorney’s office reported.

Evidence seized included about 40 fraudulently obtained Electronic Benefits Transfers cards, roughly 30 of which video surveillance shows Shelby trying to use at four different ATM machines May 1, the complaint said.

In applying for his own government benefits, authorities say Shelby also was fraudulent. He claimed in his application that he lived in St. Paul, for example, when he actually lived in Fargo, legal documents say.

He also reported being without a car and without any income when he was in fact driving a Cadillac Escalade and earning a “substantial” illegal income from fraudulently obtained EBT cards, the complaint said.

He has an extensive criminal history in Minnesota, with several convictions for domestic violence, violating no-contact orders, theft and fraud-related crimes.

While investigators believe Shelby was the principal player in the schemes, they suspect two others may have assisted him, the county attorney’s office reported.

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