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WHITESTONE GROCERS ARRESTED AND CHARGED WITH PRICE GOUGING

District Attorney Melinda Katz Provides Phone Number to Report Gouging

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz, along with the New York City Police Department and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) New York, today announced the arrest of 2 individuals who allegedly sold medical face masks from a Whitestone grocery store Wednesday at an inflated price. Face masks – mandated to be worn by anyone outside who cannot socially distance from others – cost about \$1 each.

Queens District Attorney Katz said, “Sadly, the outbreak of the coronavirus has inspired greed and manipulation. We are still in the midst of a crisis and people are still dying every day from COVID-19. We are actively seeking out individuals and businesses that would take advantage of people’s real fears during this pandemic to line their own pockets. If you know of a business or individual inflating the price of needed personal protection equipment, please call my office at 718 286-6673.”

NYPD Commissioner Dermot Shea said, “The individuals charged in this case put profits over the health of their fellow New Yorkers by charging exorbitant fees for face masks that could save people’s lives. These arrests should serve as a warning: the NYPD is vigilant in investigating those who prey on New Yorkers and attempt to financially benefit during the pandemic.”

The District Attorney identified the defendants as Queens residents Tae Kyong Kim, 49, of College Point, and Jung Soo Lee, 61, of Bayside. The 2 defendants were both issued desk appearance tickets and ordered to appear in court on September 4, 2020. At that time, the defendants will be formally charged with a New York City Administrative Code violation under the Department of Consumer and Worker’s Protection’s Emergency Price Gouging Rule declaring it an unconscionable trade practice to increase the price of essential goods and services during an imminent threat to public safety more than 10 percent above the price at which the same good could have previously been purchased by consumers 30 to 60 days prior to the March 15, 2020 rule.

According to the charges, an undercover detective visited the Raspberry Farm grocery store at 150-15 14th Avenue in Whitestone, Queens Wednesday shortly after 8 a.m. Inside the store, the detective noticed several displays for boxes of face masks along with signs with purchase prices for the masks. The price tag for a box of 2 KF94 masks was \$10. The “buyer” picked up a box and the merchant allegedly charged him \$10.

Continuing, the DA said, according to the charges, a second detective visited the store shortly after 12 noon the same day and saw 12 boxes of 10 KN95 masks listed for \$45 each. This “buyer” allegedly purchased a single box for \$45 from the cashier. Police allegedly recovered 24 boxes containing 10 KN95 masks, 35 boxes containing 50 disposable face masks, 31 boxes containing 4 disposable masks, 153 single packs of KF94 face masks and 67 dust proof face masks.

Further, according to the charges, said the District Attorney, law enforcement executed a court-authorized search warrant yesterday at the grocery store. Police allegedly recovered invoices showing the managers paid \$30 for the KN95 masks they were re-selling for \$45. And they allegedly charged \$39 for a box of 50 disposable masks, which they allegedly purchased for \$24. The defendants allegedly told police in sum and substance that they had increased the prices of everything in their store by 50 percent.

The joint investigation was conducted by members of the Queens District Attorney’s Office, the New York City Police Department and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) New York.

Assistant District Attorney Rachel B. Stein, of the District Attorney’s Economic and Environmental Crimes Bureau, is prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney Christina Hanophy, Bureau Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Gerard A. Brave.

It should be noted that a criminal complaint is merely an accusation and that a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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Note to Editors: E-version of press release and photo posted at www.queensda.org.