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**OPERATION SELF CHECKOUT: THIRTEEN DEFENDANTS INDICTED FOR
STEALING MORE THAN \$2.2 MILLION IN MERCHANDISE FROM HOME DEPOT
LOCATIONS IN NINE STATES**

Defendants Charged in 780-Count Indictment; Court-Authorized Warrants Resulted in An Additional \$1.5 Million Worth of Stolen Product Recovered; Largest Organized Theft Operation to be Prosecuted in Queens

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz and Governor Kathy Hochul announced today that 13 defendants were charged in a 780-count indictment with grand larceny, conspiracy and criminal possession of stolen property for operating a stolen goods and fencing ring that targeted Home Depot locations in New York and eight other states. Members of the Queens-based theft crew allegedly stole building supplies, power tools, smoke alarms, air conditioners, laundry detergent, paper towels and other goods in 319 documented thefts, totaling more than \$2.2 million, during a 13-month period. The items were then sold to black market retailers, known as fences, who allegedly ordered specific items to be stolen and then resold those goods to consumers.

District Attorney Katz said: "Thirteen defendants, over \$2.2 million in merchandise, 319 incidents of theft, nine states and 128 separate Home Depot stores are the facts alleged, resulting in a 780-count indictment. The defendants took breaks for lunch and dinner, sometimes hitting the same Home Depot up to four times in one day. The stolen items were then resold to consumers, through a Brooklyn storefront or on Facebook Marketplace. Working with our partners at the New York State Police, we brought this brazen operation to a halt. I thank Governor Hochul for signing laws that provide prosecutors' offices with tools to more efficiently investigate, and more effectively charge, organized retail theft and fencing operations."

Governor Kathy Hochul said: "Since taking office, my highest priority has been driving down crime and keeping New Yorkers safe. Following a post-pandemic spike in retail theft, I committed new funds to establish a dedicated retail theft task force and secured stronger laws to hold people who commit these crimes accountable. With stronger laws and better support for District Attorneys, local police departments, and the State Police, we're stopping organized retail theft rings in their tracks and ensuring a safer retail environment for business owners, staff, and shoppers throughout New York."

New York State Police Superintendent Steven G. James said: "This case sends a strong message that would be criminals – if you engage in retail theft, we will find you and hold you accountable to the full extent of the law. Retail theft has real victims – threatening the safety of shoppers and retail workers, creating enormous losses for businesses, and rising prices for the rest of us. I want to commend the outstanding work of our investigators and our partners at the Queens County District Attorney's Office, and I want to thank Governor Hochul for the support she has provided to help us fight back against organized retail theft."

Scott Glenn, Vice President of Asset Protection at The Home Depot, said: "Protecting the safety and

well-being of our customers, associates, and communities is paramount to The Home Depot. Combating organized retail crime goes far beyond our bottom line, and we applaud the Queens County District Attorney's Office and the New York State Police for the success of Operation Self Checkout. For years, this prolific organized retail crime resulted in multimillion-dollar losses for The Home Depot. Though this crime ring was exclusively focused on The Home Depot, organized retail crime is a significant problem for large retailers and communities nationwide. We are proud to stand at the forefront of efforts to combat these criminals and are grateful for the tireless work of District Attorney Melinda Katz's office and the New York State Police in dismantling this enterprise."

Eleven defendants were arraigned yesterday on a 780-count indictment charging them all with conspiracy in the fourth degree and variously charging them with grand larceny in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree and other crimes. **(See addendum.)**

One defendant remains at large and another will be arraigned at a later date.

Queens Supreme Court Justice David Kirschner remanded the alleged crew leader ordered the defendants to return to court on various dates in January. The members of the alleged theft crew face up to 25 years in prison, if convicted. The alleged fences face up to 15 years in prison, if convicted.

The DA's office investigation began in June 2024 when members of DA's Detective Bureau observed stolen air conditioners from Home Depot while conducting surveillance in a separate matter. An investigation was launched that included the use of license plate readers and court-authorized electronic surveillance. Home Depot assisted with the investigation by providing crucial video and documentary evidence.

DA Katz said, that according to the indictment and investigation, between August 14, 2024, and September 11, 2025, the theft crew, led by defendant Armando Diaz of Flushing, met almost daily at 5:30 a.m. in a parking lot at 57th Avenue and Hoffman Drive in East Elmhurst to prepare for the day's "hits." The locations of Home Depots to be targeted were determined by a review of merchandise in each store as shown on the retailer's website and app.

Diaz and seven other members of the theft crew traveled in Diaz's van and in another lookout vehicle to the targeted locations.

Three or four theft crew members entered the Home Depot separately. They did not engage with each other once inside and walked through the aisles as if they were browsing.

Diaz, who was on a conference call with the crew through their earbuds, provided directions on what to steal and how, and whether anyone was watching.

Items were routinely placed in a 96-gallon garbage bin, for instance, or in a cart so they could be wheeled out of the store. In some instances, a crew member placed a large piece of sheetrock or plywood in the cart to shield himself as he wheeled it outside. Oftentimes, a member of the crew distracted a Home Depot employee to facilitate another member of the crew leaving the store with stolen goods and without detection.

Defendant Joana Carolina "La Mona" Fermin allegedly parked in a Home Depot lot and surveilled the property for police officers. She also notified crew members inside the store to go outside and move Diaz's van closer to an exit if a spot became available.

Among the most common items stolen were insulation kits, buckets of reflective roof coating, power

tools, air conditioners and smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.

The amount of merchandise stolen a single day ranged from about \$1,800 to nearly \$35,000.

The theft crew often broke for lunch in between “shifts” at a restaurant in Middle Village.

Once the theft crew had the day’s haul, it was sold to the operation’s five fences. The merchandise changed hands in a Bronx parking lot and was then driven to a storage unit in that borough; at a Brooklyn home and a Brooklyn storefront; and on an Elmhurst street corner or an Elmhurst residence.

Diaz unloaded merchandise into his home or into his van and Mercedes Benz.

A court-authorized search yesterday of three homes, 14 storage units and eight vehicles resulted in the seizure of voluminous amounts of stolen products, including but not limited to:

- Smoke and carbon monoxide detectors
- Air conditioners
- Electrical outlets and outlet boxes
- Lithium-ion batteries
- Copper wire
- Power tools
- Portable jump starters
- Spray foam insulation
- Roof coating
- Housewrap
- Standby generators
- Reciprocating saws
- Heat guns
- Bluetooth speakers
- Bolt cutters
- Battery powered chainsaw kits
- Rechargeable flood lights
- Handheld blowers
- Heavy duty tape

The value of the recovered product is estimated at \$1.5 million. The estimate is likely to rise as detective investigators continue to sort through the items.

The investigation was conducted by members of the District Attorney’s Detectives Bureau, led by Christopher Gately, under the supervision of Lieutenant Joseph Oliver and Sergeant David Moore, and under the overall supervision of Chief Investigator Robert LaPollo; and Assistant District Attorney Brandi Kligman, Assistant Deputy Bureau Chief of the of the District Attorney’s Crime Strategies and Intelligence Bureau with the assistance of Senior Intelligence Analyst Joana Ceballos, Intelligence Analyst Luis Perez-Cortes and Supervising Intelligence Analyst Victoria Filipe, under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney Shanon N. LaCorte, Bureau Chief; as well as members of the New York State Police Special Investigations Unit under the supervision of Senior Investigator Mark Buglione, and under the overall supervision of Lieutenant Timothy Gould and Major James Browne.

The District Attorney also thanks members of the Department of Homeland Security Investigations, the

New York State Office of the Attorney General's Special Operations Unit and Home Depot for their assistance.

Assistant District Attorneys Kligman and Catherine Jahn, Supervisor in the District Attorney's Major Economic Crimes Bureau, are prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney Mary Lowenburg, Bureau Chief, Assistant District Attorney Catherine Kane, Senior Deputy Bureau Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney of Investigations Gerard A. Brave.

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

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ADDENDUM

Armando Diaz, 52, of 56th Road in Flushing, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the first degree, grand larceny in the third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Diaz is due back in court January 14.

Francisco Ayala-Ariza, 35, of 97th Street in Woodhaven, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the first degree, grand larceny in the third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Ayala-Ariza is due back in court January 14.

Wilfredo "Fredo" Arango-Calle, 37, of 225th Street in Oakland Gardens, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the first degree, grand larceny in the third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Arango-Calle is due back in court January 14.

Oscar Eduardo Valencia Diaz, 41, of 60th Avenue in Middle Village, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the first degree, grand larceny in the third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Diaz is due back in court January 13.

Mateo Arias Toro, 29, of 63rd Avenue in Middle Village, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the first degree, grand larceny in the third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Toro is due back in court January 13.

Victor Diaz, 50, of 59th Avenue in Flushing, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the first degree, grand larceny in the third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Diaz is due back in court January 7.

Joana Carolina "La Mona" Fermin, 38, of Hicksville, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the first degree, grand larceny in the third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third

degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Fermin is due back in court January 7.

Freddy “El Torito” Padilla, 45, of Elder Avenue in the Bronx, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the second degree, grand larceny in third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Padilla is due back in court January 7.

Kyle “Italian” Goonan, 34, of East 64th Street in Brooklyn, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the second degree, grand larceny in third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Goonan is due back in court January 13.

David Araque Montoya, 31, of 81st Street in Middle Village, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the second degree, grand larceny in third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. The defendant is in custody on another matter and will be arraigned at a later date.

Angel Yamba Ortiz, 29, of Gleane Street in Elmhurst, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the second degree, grand larceny in third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Ortiz is due back in court January 22.

Nechemia Blatter, 61, of East 19th Street in Brooklyn, was indicted on charges of conspiracy in the fourth degree, grand larceny in the second degree, grand larceny in third degree, grand larceny in the fourth degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the second degree, criminal possession of stolen property in the third degree and criminal possession of stolen property in the fourth degree. Blatter is due back in court January 13.

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