



# ERIK NASARENKO

VENTURA COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY

## NEWS RELEASE



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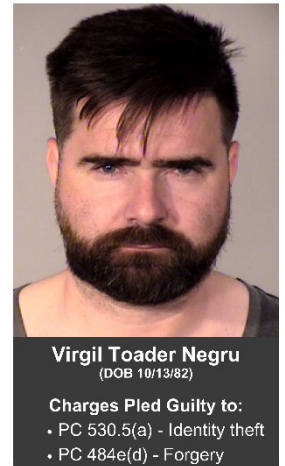
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### Romanian Man Sentenced as DA Targets Government Fraud Schemes

VENTURA, Calif. – Ventura County District Attorney Erik Nasarenko announced today that Virgil Toader Negru (DOB 10/13/82), of Romania, was sentenced in Ventura County Superior Court to 240 days jail and two years felony probation. Negru previously pled guilty on June 6, 2023, to one count of felony identity theft and one count of forgery related to card skimming government fraud schemes.

On April 1, 2023, Negru was seen engaging in suspicious activity at two ATM sites in Simi Valley during a multi-agency targeted investigation on Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card skimming fraud. Upon contacting Negru, he had 12 gift cards that were cloned into EBT or Employment Development Department (EDD) cards. Further investigation revealed that Negru attempted to withdraw money from one of the cards.



Marius Vlaic



Roman Janecek

EBT cards, much like debit cards, allow recipients to access their food and cash benefits provided by the state, while EDD cards are used for distributing state funds for benefits like unemployment, disability insurance, and paid family leave.

Since March 2023, Negru and seven other Romanian skimming suspects have been arrested for skimming crimes tied to Ventura County. Five of the suspects have been linked to one another and are alleged to have stolen hundreds of thousands of dollars in EBT CalWORKs money. Two of them, Marius Vlaic (DOB 11/20/99) and Roman Janecek (DOB 08/22/93) have been charged with more than a dozen felony counts, including conspiracy and grand theft, related to several instances of CalWORKs theft using cloned EBT cards. Vlaic and Janecek each posted \$50,000 bail in April and are alleged to have violated bail terms by cutting

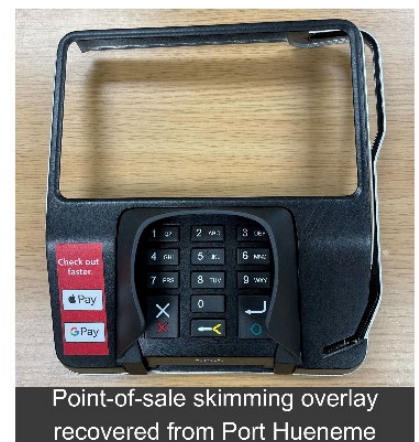
off GPS ankle monitors. The charged defendants are at large and have felony warrants out for their arrest.

“The Government Fraud Unit established a strong network of investigative resources nationwide, which helps us identify the skimming suspects,” District Attorney Supervising Investigator Heather Tallent said. “My team puts tremendous effort into solving these crimes. I recommend skimming crews think twice about committing these crimes in Ventura County.”

According to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), between January and June of this year, over \$523,000 was fraudulently withdrawn from Ventura County ATMs. Thieves made 1,095 EBT withdrawals during that time, swiping up to 30 times at an ATM.

In 2022, California lost more than \$60 million in CalWORKs theft. The cost to taxpayers can be extrapolated to approximately \$120 million since the stolen funds are typically reimbursed to the clients. This loss summary does not include CalFresh losses, which are also targeted by skimming theft.

EBT cards are easily cloned because they do not have modern security features. The magnetic strip data is duplicated at ATMs using deep insert skimmers that captures the information on a microchip. The thieves also place pinhole cameras hidden in labels, false frames, or mounted above the ATM. The camera captures victims typing in their PIN, and the information is reconciled with the magnetic strip data to be cloned onto any card that has a magnetic strip (gift cards and hotel room key cards are typical). A similar scheme happens at market point-of-sale machines using an overlay that looks identical to the point-of-sale machine. The skimming devices are often undetectable. Even if you have your EBT card, someone could have a copy.



“In merely six months this year, more than half a million dollars in government benefits was drained illegally from Ventura County ATMs,” said District Attorney Erik Nasarenko. “But through aggressive prosecution and coordinative investigative efforts, we are identifying suspects, alerting consumers and business about ways to protect themselves and disrupting skimming networks operating in the county.”

There are ways to protect your EBT/EDD card from being skimmed and your money from being stolen. Funds are deposited at the beginning of each month, and the following can help prevent thieves from stealing your information:

1. Change your PIN the night before your deposit day every month. If they do not have your new PIN, they cannot use their cloned card.
2. Always cover the keypad while entering your PIN so a camera cannot see it.
3. Lightly tug on the point-of-sale machine trim before making a transaction. If it lifts off, it is a skimming overlay.
4. Use direct deposit. CalWORKs will deposit directly into your bank account.

If you suspect an ATM or point-of-sale machine may have a skimming device, don't use it! Let the bank or business know that something is not right and then call your local law enforcement agency.

For retailers, be vigilant about bulk purchases of items such as energy drinks or baby formula, which can be resold to markets, restaurants, and online marketplaces. If someone calls your store in advance to broker a large purchase, request ID verification and make sure the name matches



their form of payment. EBT cards will always be programmed onto cards that depict a California coastal scene with the words "Golden State Advantage" and have the recipient's name printed on the card. If the customer plans to make the purchase using EBT but the card depicts anything other than what is described above, do not accept that

form of payment because it is likely a cloned card. Bulk purchases for resale using CalFresh is prohibited because CalFresh regulations do not allow resale of food items purchased with these funds. Suspicious transactions should always be reported to law enforcement.