

Food Stamps Easy To Obtain In SC

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Beating the food stamp system is as easy as signing your name. So says a man who cheated on the welfare program here for nearly four months.

Not only did food stamp workers fail to check out his phony name or social security number, they didn't even bat an eye when he reported his food stamps stolen a short time later.

In fact, said the man, the worker "bargained" with him over the amount of food stamps he thought had been taken.

The man, who was planted in the food stamp program by the Santa Cruz Police Department, said getting the food stamps was easier than he had ever expected.

But food stamp officials here say they are not surprised. Anyone who wants to defraud the food stamp system can get as much aid as he wants.

"Our hands are tied," said Irene Stevens, acting food stamp supervisor for the county. "We have to treat people with courtesy and dignity. Welfare is a right.

"Maybe sometimes, we want to be harder, but we can't. Our hands are tied by the regulations."

Stevens, who supervises a system that has often been the target of criticism, said she was not surprised to learn someone had beaten the food stamp system.

"Anyone who really wants to defraud the system can do it," she said.

The department, said Stevens, is hamstrung by regulations that prevent it from prying into an applicant's personal history.

In fact, new regulations issued by the federal government do not require verification on many of the applicant's statements — including name, social security number, residence and even income.

"We're not sitting here and giving away money," said Stevens. "We are just following the rules."

The man who set out to beat the system, which had 7,000 recipients last month, began his odyssey into the food stamp program at the request of Santa Cruz Police Chief Geno Pini.

Pini, who serves on the city's Mall Committee, said he wanted to check out allegations that people were "taking advantage of the system."

He said he believed a large portion of the "tramp population" was being supported by the food stamp program.

"At first, I thought it would be extremely difficult," said the man who was chosen to pose as a food stamp recipient. "I felt a little apprehensive about what I could say and how I should look."

But once the application process got under way, he said he realized how easy it would be to get around the regulations. He said he gave the department a phony name and a phony social security number. In the space supplied for residence, the

man printed that he lived in a cave at the beach. He wrote, "I don't know" in answer to the question about his birthplace and did not provide the eligibility worker with any form of identification.

The answers did not seem to faze the eligibility worker.

Stevens said a food stamp employee can not demand to see an applicant's social security card unless the employee has reason to suspect some irregularity. Likewise, under new regulations, workers do not have to verify statements about a person's income.

An applicant who comes in without any form of identification can still receive benefits within two to three days, said Stevens.

However, the applicant must provide some kind of ID — drivers license, library card, rent receipt or even a utility bill —
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Carrie Ann Kelsey sheds a few

Food Stamp Cheating Is Easy

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within 30 days before receiving more stamps.

The phony applicant said he was asked to draw a map of his campsite at the beach and obtain verification from a third party.

When the phony recipient claimed he didn't know anyone in the area, the eligibility worker told him "just have someone on the mall sign it at the bottom, verifying that is where you live."

"It will be o.k.," the worker reportedly told the police agent.

The man said he got a signature and returned the next day. Three days later, he had his food stamps card and \$63 worth of stamps.

During the three-day waiting period, the man said he was given a list of places where he could obtain free meals and food.

Stevens said regulations do not require that a person live in a conventional house. An applicant can live in a campground, on the beach or even under a bridge.

However, if an eligibility worker's suspicions are aroused, a home check can be made before the applicant receives his food stamps.

Stevens said it usually takes two to three days for someone to receive food stamps in the county and that the man's experience was not unusual as far as being required to draw a map of the campsite.

In the case of the camper, the food stamp card and purchase voucher will be addressed to general delivery and can be picked up at the post office.

However, two post offices — the Santa Cruz and Seabright branches — require that a person obtain a mailing address after 30 days. That means a recipient must find a place to receive his mail, said Stevens. Sometimes, the applicant is allowed to pick up his vouchers at the food stamp office itself.

According to the phony applicant, he reported his food stamps stolen shortly after he received them.

When he told the eligibility worker, the food stamp employee asked him how much he had lost.

When he said he didn't know, the worker asked "How many do you think were stolen, \$45, \$50, \$55? How many?"

When the phony applicant again said he didn't know, the two settled on the \$45 figure.

The man said he also gave them a fake police "case number," since a food stamp recipient is required to report any theft to law enforcement agencies before he can get new stamps.

Pini confirmed that no one from the food stamp office ever called to verify that a report had been made on the allegedly stolen stamps.

Stevens, however, said eligibility workers will check out a case if it is suspicious. She said employees ask for a case number

or a copy of the police report before stamps are replaced. Anyone suspected of filing a false report is referred to the departments fraud investigation unit.

Stevens also said if she discovered the identity of the Police Department agent, he would be prosecuted for fraud.

But Pini said the phony applicant cannot be prosecuted, in his opinion, since there was no "intent to defraud." Pini also said he would be returning each one of the stamps obtained for his department.

"I'm not charging anyone with any illegalities. I'm just criticizing their procedures — their non-system of verification," said Pini.

He said he believes many of the so-called "street people" are being supported by the system and that there is

major abuse of the food stamp system.

"Santa Cruz is known quite well throughout the United States as an easy place to live," said the phony recipient, who said he also spent time talking with the street people. "The system supports you here."

Stevens said, however, that Santa Cruz was no different in its food stamp policy than it is anywhere else. Santa Cruz is a nice place to be poor, however, since it's near the beach, the mountains and has a nice climate, she said.

Stevens, too, said she would like to see the food stamp program tightened and lamented those who cheat.

"People feel that stealing from a store is a crime," she said with a shake of her head. "But they feel stealing from the government is not."

Report Colombia Refused To Allow Hostage Visit

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — The Colombian government refused to allow the wife and daughter of the captive Venezuelan ambassador to visit him Saturday in the occupied Dominican Republic Embassy, a Bogota newspaper reported. It was the ambassador's 62nd birthday.

The usually reliable newspaper El Tiempo reported that guerrillas holding Venezuelan Ambassador Virgilio Lovera had agreed to let the ambassador's wife and child take him a birthday cake but that the government refused.

Lovera has been reported suffering nervous tension and high blood pressure since he and 31 other hostages, including U.S. Ambassador Diego Asencio and 18 other foreign diplomats, were taken hostage during a diplomatic reception at the embassy Feb. 27.

A Venezuelan government representative sent here to deal with the embassy crisis refused comment on the report.

On Friday, the daughter of another hostage, Israeli Ambassador Eliahu Barak, was allowed to visit the embassy for nearly 20 minutes. It was the first time a relative of a hostage was allowed inside the building. An Israeli Embassy spokesman here said she had the permission of the government and the leader of the guerrillas.

Negotiations to free the hostages are to resume Monday, 11 days after the last bargaining session broke down in disagreement.

The negotiations have reportedly narrowed to the guerrilla demand for the release of alleged political prisoners. The guerrillas have identified themselves as

members of the M-19 group. M-19 stands for Movement 19, referring to elections on April 19, 1970, that the guerrillas claim were fraudulent.

The government of President Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala, who called the embassy occupation the worst crisis in Colombia's 170 years of independence, has offered to fly the guerrillas out of the country but not to meet their other demands.

KC Strike Ends

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a 12-day work slowdown in late December.

Saturday's city council action allowed the men to be reinstated by the court without forcing Kipp to back down on his earlier action upholding the firings.

The agreement, signed by Germann and Mayor Richard Berkley, spelled out that the firemen would return to work immediately upon the court's order to reinstate the 42.

Germann said firemen would be told to remain by their phones and he expected at least some of them to be on the job with the 7 a.m. shift Sunday.

The firefighters had worked since May 1 without a contract but were reported close to an agreement early last week before the city announced it would not rehire the 42.

The firemen agreed to a 15 percent hike in salaries over two years. Firefighters were paid annual salaries of between \$12,132 and \$17,982 under the old contract.