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Fake IDs came from BMV

Mother, kids accused in license scheme

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The Cincinnati Enquirer

Diane Ward and her two children had jobs at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) and were such popular clerks that their lines at the Red Bank branch often ran six people deep.

They also found a way to earn more than \$4,000 in bonus money, prosecutors say, before it all came crashing down around them.

Now the Roselawn mother

and her kids are jobless and accused in a case authorities call the largest fake-identification ring in Ohio's BMV history.

Authorities say the Wards advertised their scheme by word of mouth on high school and college campuses but slipped up by leaving a computer trail of at least 137 people for whom they made fake driver's licenses or state IDs.

Ms. Ward, 44, and her son, Ernie Ward Jr., 20, were indicted Monday by a Hamilton County grand jury on multiple counts of soliciting and accepting bribes in what Prosecutor Mike Allen described as "a Pandora's box of corruption."

If convicted, the mother and

son each face prison terms of up to 45 years and fines of up to \$90,000. Ms. Ward's teen-age daughter already has pleaded guilty to bribery charges in Hamilton County Juvenile Court, Mr. Allen said.

The mother and son are accused of accepting bribes of \$25 to \$100 for each fake ID. They allegedly used the person's real picture, but altered names, dates of birth and Social Security numbers.

So far, prosecutors have obtained signed statements from more than 35 people who bought fraudulent identification cards at the Red Bank office.

Police have cited 92 people

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with fake IDs on misdemeanor falsification charges. Most are high school and college students who are under age 21. The remaining 45 suspects are still being sought.

Some purchasers came from as far as Tennessee, Indiana and Kentucky to obtain the cards. "It's a very serious problem," Mr. Allen said.

BMV investigators have documented fake IDs being used to pass bad checks totaling thousands of dollars, and alcohol-related arrests of several people with fake IDs have been reported by Ohio Liquor Control agents and Cincinnati police.

Fake IDs not only present the danger of underage alcohol consumption, but it's worrisome that anyone with false identification could buy a firearm, Mr. Allen said.

"Though no gun sales have been uncovered, any such finding would truly be alarming and would elevate this investigation to an even more serious level," he said.

Authorities credit Cincinnati Police Officer Lonnie Grizzel for cracking the case.

He was heading to tornado relief duty April 10 when he became suspicious about a car in Ault Park. He discovered the driver and three passengers had several forms of identification. He turned the evidence over to BMV investigators, who launched a major probe into the Red Bank branch.

The BMV's deputy registrars are private contractors, and once the investigation began, detectives searched records by hand.

In the course of the probe, the Red Bank branch fired 11 of its 15 employees, said Susan Watiker, an Ohio Department of Public Safety spokeswoman.

One fired employee was former BMV assistant manager Patricia Underwood, who was given a one-year sentence last month for changing the date of birth on her own identification to be eligible for a student loan.

The investigation is continuing.

The focus now should be to look for a solution, said police Spc. Ralph Unger, a Cincinnati fraud unit investigator who has hundreds of cases each year involving fake IDs. For years, he has asked the BMV to require customers to leave a fingerprint on file in order to get an ID.

"We've got all this check fraud, grocery store fraud, bank fraud," he said. "They're all being cashed with fraudulent IDs. It's an official state document. That's your gateway to open up a bank account."

It's possible that the BMV could require fingerprints with an administrative order instead of needing new legislation, Mr. Allen said.

Fingerprinting would be ideal, Ms. Watiker agreed.

Until any administrative changes are made, police and BMV investigators will continue to look for ways to safeguard against this happening again, she said.