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Car-wash franchise charged in undocumented-worker case

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A federal grand jury yesterday charged a Horsham-based car-wash franchise and five of its managers with conspiracy to defraud the government, to harbor undocumented workers and to commit identity theft.

Authorities said that Car Care Inc., which operated full-service car washes in Norristown, Flourtown, Bryn Mawr and Cherry Hill, engaged in a scheme from 2000 to March 2006 to hire undocumented workers by giving them false names and a way to cash their checks at local banks without showing identification.

The indictment said that Car Care managers gave banks a list of employees authorized to cash paychecks and they weren't required to show any identification other than wearing T-shirts or sweatshirts bearing the Car Care logo.

Car Care managers also intentionally refrained from filing termination papers when undocumented workers quit so that the names of former employees could be given to new undocumented workers in order to keep the scheme going, the feds said.

The indictment also charged that, through January 2006, Car Care, a subsidiary of Mount Laurel-based Mace Security International Inc., used names and social-security numbers of former employees and regularly submitted earnings reports for those undocumented workers to the IRS and state agencies in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

U.S. Attorney Pat Meehan said that on any given day, up to 90 percent of the workers at the four car washes were undocumented workers and most were paid minimum wage or better.

Car Care took extraordinary steps to evade scrutiny by authorities, the indictment charged.

On Nov. 1, 2004, after Nicholas Sama, Car Care's Northeast regional manager, learned that Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents were coming to the Cherry Hill car wash to investigate a stolen ICE badge, he directed all the undocumented workers there to not show up for work, and the car wash was closed that day.

Joseph Marrone, Sama's lawyer, said that he had not yet seen the indictment and couldn't comment.

The indictment alleged that Car Care's corporate management was aware that many undocumented workers were employed at its car washes but didn't thoroughly investigate the matter.

A lawyer for Car Care couldn't be reached for comment.

Authorities said that as many as 57 undocumented workers were being processed by ICE and 14 have already been



Daily News file photo

U.S. Attorney Pat Meehan said up to 90 percent of the employees at four car washes were undocumented workers, and were being paid at least minimum wage.

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deported.

In addition to Sama, 50, of Tabernacle, N.J., and Car Care, also charged yesterday were:

Timothy Gibson, 36, of Levittown, manager at Car Care in Norristown; Lee Gordon, 36, of Philadelphia, manager in Flourtown; William Spencer, 44, of Williamstown, N.J., manager in Cherry Hill; and Herbert Wolf, 51, of Philadelphia, manager in Bryn Mawr.

The defendants potentially could face from one to two years in prison under advisory sentencing guidelines if convicted of the conspiracy charge.

The feds also want Car Care to forfeit at least \$500,000. *

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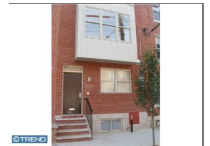
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