



## NEWS



## Members of Identity Theft Ring Sentenced to Prison

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HOUSTON – Two men who, along with other conspirators, used the personal information of dozens of victims to obtain fraudulent credit cards have been sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment, United States Attorney Kenneth Magidson announced today.

United States District Judge Melinda Harmon sentenced Richard Gaylon Conatser, 47, of Corpus Christi, Texas, and Geoffrey Michael Wentzel, 34, of Kingwood, Texas, to 124 and 65 months without parole, respectively. Conatser and Wentzel both previously pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft along with Troy Jay Bird, 43, of Corpus Christi, who will be sentenced on Feb. 10, 2012.

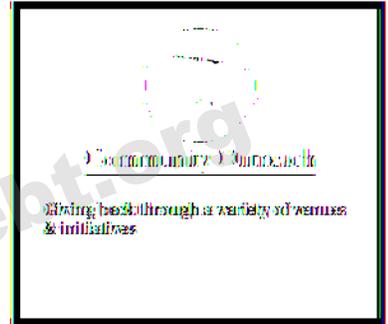
Officers with the Houston Police Department (HPD) arrested Conatser and Wentzel at Wentzel's home in Kingwood on Oct. 8, 2010. Officers had recognized Conatser from the surveillance video of a Best Buy, where items had been purchased using a credit card obtained in the name of a victim. At the home, police seized multiple laptop computers, flash drives, laminating machines, credit card magnet readers and other equipment used to make fraudulent forms of identification. Police also discovered the personal identification information of dozens of victims on the laptop computer and in credit applications from Kingwood Air Conditioning & Heating, which were also seized during a search of Wentzel's house. Wentzel is a former employee of Kingwood Air Conditioning & Heating.

Conatser and Wentzel used the personal information and fraudulent forms of identification to open credit accounts in the names of at least 45 different individuals at more than a dozen different retail stores in the Houston and Dallas areas, including Kohls, Sears, Dillard's, Home Depot and Bass Pro Shops. After being approved for credit in the victims' names, Conatser, Bird and other conspirators purchased thousands of dollars of merchandise, often being captured on video surveillance in the process. In some cases, Conatser then sold the fraudulently-purchased items to Wentzel, who in turn sold the items within days using his eBay account.

Law enforcement agents connected Conatser and Wentzel to Bird, who was previously arrested on July 15, 2010, during a traffic stop in Coppell, Texas. Police in Coppell discovered several items related to identity theft in Bird's vehicle and a hotel room where Bird and other conspirators were staying. Among the items discovered by police were fraudulent identifications and other person information belonging to victims whose information was later discovered at Wentzel's home.

In addition to their sentences, the two men were ordered to serve supervised release terms of three years following their release from federal prison. They were also ordered to pay restitution to victims totaling \$142,197.88. Conatser has been in custody since his arrest where he will remain pending transfer to a U.S. Bureau of Prisons facility in the near future. Previously released on bond, Wentzel was allowed to continue on bond and voluntarily surrender.

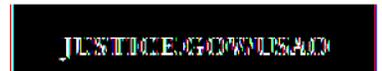
The case was investigated by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the U.S. Secret Service, the Houston Police Department and the Texas Department of Public Safety. Assistant United States Attorney David Searle is prosecuting the case.



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