

Grip tightens on Joburg municipal crooks

The net is closing in on a syndicate defrauding Joburg residents in municipal arrears.

Following an arrest on Friday, and in addition to the 13 people arrested in the past two weeks, a further 14 City of Joburg employees in the revenue department are under investigation and expected to be arrested soon.

City spokesman Nthatsi Modingoane said the syndicate, which was believed to involve the revenue department and City Power contractors, was cracking.

The woman arrested on Friday is accused of giving the syndicate information about customers in arrears.

The syndicate is believed to work from the Westbury, Newclare and Coronationville areas.

It uses the billing information to create fake notices of demand. Members of the syndicate ask that money be paid into an account that does not belong to the city. If paid, the payments are never credited to the customers' accounts.

Syndicate members threaten to terminate customers' services if they fail to pay.

"They target people who owe substantial amounts," said Modingoane.

He said Colin Vincent Hall, the alleged mastermind, who was arrested with another 12 people two weeks ago, had confessed and revealed the names of his accomplices which had resulted in the arrest of the 37-year-old woman.

So far, 31 residents have lodged complaints, but all had their services reconnected and their accounts adjusted.

Earlier this year, a Bez Valley resident called The Star to say he'd gone into Thuso House in Braamfontein to settle his arrears.

"I was pulled out of the normal queue by a man and taken into a different office. I was asked to pay R10 000 of my R20 000 bill. They said they would make the rest go away," he said.

After he made the payment, men in City Power uniforms arrived at his house several times threatening to cut off his power. He paid over R20 000 to them.

"I often had to borrow money from friends to pay them," he said.

Eventually, tired of the blackmail, he reported the matter to the police.

Peter Jones of Kensington B said he had also fallen victim to the syndicate.

His account went into arrears because he is often out of the country and he suspects he has a faulty meter.

"I get so many estimate readings going back some time, as well as a possible faulty KWH meter. I reported this and e-mailed the call centre many times asking for a reconciliation of my account. Also, visiting the department in Randburg has not helped," he said.

In June, he received a call from a "Mr Andre Gordon@City PowerOutsource Collections Dept" demanding payment of R35 000.

"He was giving me accurate information about my account which only someone sitting at the computer of City Power would have. He knew what he was talking about. He said there was a termination notice out for me and that attorneys were involved. Under duress, I made the payment of R35 000, but something made

me suspicious, and, after searching the internet, I could not find the attorneys stated on the document," he said.

He laid a charge of fraud at the police station and the Hawks took a statement from him. However, he feels the city owes him the money back.

The woman arrested on Friday was expected to appear in the Johannesburg Specialised Commercial Crime Court today.

The city has also warned customers to be on the lookout for another fraudulent e-mail saying the city's banking details have changed.

Customers wanting to validate their account information can do so through the call centre, the people's centre or by phoning 0800 002 587.

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