Apr 6, 2023

Contact Whitney Ray

Phone 850-245-0150

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL STATE OF FLORIDA

Florida Attorney General's Office News Release

Organized Retail Theft Ring Spanning 16 Counties



TALLAHASSEE, Fla.—Attorney General Ashley Moody, Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement shut down a major organized retail theft operation that spanned 16 counties. An investigation by Attorney General Moody's Office of Statewide Prosecution, the Polk County Sheriff's Office and FDLE found that an organized retail crime ring caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in losses to Home Depot. Attorney General Moody's Statewide Prosecutors are charging six defendants with felony counts of grand theft.
Attorney General Ashley Moody said, "The suspects in this case went to great lengths and long distances to execute this elaborate construction rental scheme—stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in heavy construction equipment. They thought they were being clever by using stolen identities and smashing the GPS trackers on the equipment, but it wasn't enough to outsmart Sheriff Judd's deputies, FDLE and my Statewide Prosecutors."

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd said, "We appreciate the hard work and cooperation from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and Attorney General Ashley Moody's Office of Statewide Prosecution—because of the multi-county theft and fraud that occurred in this case, we could not have held these thieves accountable without their state-wide resources. Retail theft is a serious problem in Florida. It drives up the cost of goods and we all suffer through higher prices. These brazen thieves made a living systematically stealing. They made the mistake of stealing in Polk County—our detectives are among the best in the nation investigating organized retail theft. We will absolutely hold them accountable and put their butts in jail and then prison."

Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner Mark Glass said, "Organized retail theft has real-life impacts on our hard-working citizens who pay more for goods because of theft. I

appreciate FDLE’s Orlando Regional Operations Center special agents and analysts that worked to recover a portion of the stolen property. The Florida Department of Law Enforcement, in partnership with Attorney General Moody’s Office of Statewide Prosecution and the Polk County Sheriff’s Office, will continue to fight these crimes.”

The investigation showed that the defendants went to Home Depot stores across the state, renting heavy equipment and destroying the attached GPS tracker in order to resell the stolen items online. The investigation, beginning in December 2021, showed at least 50 suspected thefts during the time frame of the investigation. To complete the scheme, suspects utilized stolen identifications, as well as misled unsuspecting individuals to use identifications, to complete the tool rentals. The suspects sold most of the stolen items on Facebook Marketplace.

Here are some examples of the stolen pieces of equipment:





Attorney General Moody’s Statewide Prosecutors are charging 5 of the 6 defendants with grand theft of varying amounts, from first to third-degree felonies.

Attorney General Moody’s Statewide Prosecutors are charging the ringleader Byron Johnson with one count of grand theft, more than $100,000, a first-degree felony; one count of scheme to defraud, a third-degree felony; nine counts of dealing in stolen property, all second-degree felonies; and unlawful possession of the personal identification information of another person, a third-degree felony.

Attorney General Moody's Statewide Prosecutors will prosecute this case.

Seeing the growing trend of organized retail theft and smash-and-grab mobs in other parts of the nation that led many corporations to leave cities, Attorney General Moody took action to protect Florida businesses and consumers. There are reports of companies giving up on cities that cannot get organized retail crime under control. There are also businesses and record numbers of Americans moving to Florida and Polk County is the fastest-growing county in Florida—even one of the top growing counties in the nation. Florida’s leaders and its law-and-order approach are contributing to this mass exodus to Polk County and the rest of the state.

In December 2021, Attorney General Moody launched the Florida Organized Retail Crime Exchange—a statewide task force and database to help spot trends, identify subjects and take down massive, organized retail theft rings. FORCE also bridges the gap between law enforcement, prosecutors and retailers to work together and share information on theft-incidents statewide. Since taking office, Attorney General Moody’s Statewide Prosecutors have filed 79

cases and charged and/or sentenced 236 individuals in cases involving organized retail theft. For more information on FORCE, click here.