

LongIslandPress.com

Safe at Home: Guarding Against Health Aides Gone Bad

By [Timothy Bolger](#) on March 31st, 2011



Police say families should guard against home health aides same as any other worker invited into the home: by putting away personal documents.

When a home health aide firm learned last month that one of their trainees had a warrant out for her arrest, authorities breathed a sigh of relief that the identity theft suspect was caught before she had access to vulnerable elderly and infirm patients whom she could have targeted.

But less than a week before Suffolk County police apprehended [Lisa Krapf](#), three home health aides were arrested the same day on charges of stealing from Long Island-based patients—victims often suffering from debilitating afflictions such as Alzheimer’s disease. Investigators say there is no evidence that thefts committed by home health aides are trending upward, but they took the blip in the radar as an opportunity to remind the public how to prevent such crimes.

“In actuality, the system worked,” Detective Sgt. Steven Jensen, head of the [Suffolk County police Identity Theft Unit](#), said of Kraft. “You have someone who’s showing a proclivity toward this activity and it avoided this provider from hiring somebody who had done something like that in the past.”

The 44-year-old Staten Island woman is free on \$7,500 bail after pleading not guilty to identity theft and grand larceny. She allegedly stole a Colorado woman’s banking information and used forged checks to withdraw more than \$19,000 from her account at a Washington Mutual Bank branch in Huntington Station bank three years ago.

Police issued a warrant for her arrest in 2008 but she was not apprehended until Feb. 9 after she was flagged in a state-mandated criminal background check while attending a three-week class at Partners in Care, a Manhattan-based provider of home care aides—workers who tend to patients in often emotionally sensitive settings.

“These things do happen from time to time, it’s not a frequent thing,” said Jay Conolly, senior director of human resources for the agency, which employs 8,700 home health aides that conduct 39,000 weekly visits with patients in New York City, Westchester and Nassau counties. “We are doing absolutely everything we can do to screen these people.”

He said despite fingerprinting, drug tests and checking references, “people are still human beings and still do bad things from time to time.” Kraft was preparing to take her final exam but would not have conducted field training until after she cleared the background test, Conolly said.

Jensen, the police sergeant, said that the occasional bad apple can be found within a licensed and certified agency—like two of the three women arrested Feb 3. But he said patients are at increased risk with independent home health aides who don’t have an agency to vouch for them.

Industry experts agreed.

“With an agency you can always pick up the phone if you have a complaint, if you have a request, if you have a question,” said Christie Johnson, president of the New York State Association of Health Care Providers, a trade association. “Going through an agency helps protect you.”

She worries that the actions of a few tend to taint the perception of the entire field—even more so when such cases are clustered together.

Nassau County police said 43-year-old [Micheline Garcon](#) of Valley Stream pawned an assortment of ladies jewelry that was reported stolen from the homes of an 89-year-old Lynbrook victim and an 85-year-old North Massapequa victim while she was employed as a home health care worker.

Detectives in that county also said [Sonia Walsh](#), 43, of Far Rockaway, stole more than \$130,000 from an 81-year-old North Hills woman in October 2009 and fraudulently cashed a check in the amount of \$210 from an 83-year-old Garden City man in January.

Suffolk County police said 31-year-old Neketa Williams-Taylor of Ridge used a victim’s Suffolk Federal Credit Union credit card number to order \$1,200 worth of clothing from different websites between December 2009 and February 2010.

Garcon was released without bail after being charged with criminal possession of stolen property. Walsh pleaded not guilty to grand larceny and possession of a forged instrument and is being held at Nassau County jail after her bail was set at \$52,000 bond or \$21,000 cash. Williams-Taylor was released on appearance tickets after being charged with identity theft.

Garcon worked for Gentiva, a nationwide home health aide placement agency based in Atlanta and Williams-Taylor worked for Access Home Care in Port Jefferson Station.

Representatives for Gentiva did not return a call seeking comment. Access Home Care could not be reached. Walsh had been hired independently by the family she is accused of stealing from.

Jensen said such cases show the need for people to better protect themselves, even in their own home.

“You need to secure your personal information inside your home if you’re going to have any kind of provider—home health aide, somebody to come in to do renovations,” he said. Even friends and relatives have been known to steal identities using billing information that is not properly secured, he added.

“If it’s out there and it’s available, many people have reasons to use it,” Jensen said. “It’s basically just a matter of economics.”