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July 2, 2009

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DA Offers Hot Check Amnesty Plan as Prelude to July Arrest Sweep

Houston, Tx – Writers of bad checks can avoid criminal charges by paying off the amounts before July 15, or they face arrest in an upcoming, first-ever District Attorney’s Office roundup, Harris County District Attorney Patricia Lykos announced Thursday.

The amnesty offer is available for hot check writers who have not yet had arrest warrants issued against them. Offer notices are being mailed now to almost 1,000 offenders.

John Boone, chief of the DA’s Check Fraud Division, explained that the amnesty program will enable victims to be compensated expeditiously. It also allows offenders a final chance to make good on their bad checks and avoid criminal prosecution.

Last year, the division handled 10,000 hot checks and secured about \$1.6 million in restitution. The amnesty offer comes during an economic downturn which is expected to fuel a substantial increase in hot checks. Boone explained that merchants feeling the financial pinch are more likely to pursue cases because it is harder for them to just write off the losses.

“And people in financial distress are more tempted to take the ‘shortcut’ of writing bad checks for goods,” Boone said. “That is very short-sighted, because the consequences are very long-term.” A “hot check” is a theft and theft is a crime of moral turpitude.

A hot check written for more than \$20 subjects the offender to up to six months in jail and fine of up to \$2,000. Penalties go up significantly for higher amounts. Even probation, an option for some first-offenders, comes with sizable fees, restitution, a criminal record and other costs.

After the amnesty period ends, offenders can expect arrest and a stay in jail. “It is that simple – pay or stay”, Boone said.

The county-wide sweep for hot check violators is scheduled for an undisclosed date later in July, and will target offenders’ homes and workplaces. Participating will be District Attorney’s investigators and deputies from the Harris County Sheriff’s Office and every Constable’s Office in the county.

Inquiries regarding hot checks and the amnesty program, which ends July 15, can be directed to the DA’s Check Fraud Division at 713-755-7884. (end)

