

# Fraud hot line proves itself

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**By JAMES RUFUS KOREN**  
**Valley Press Staff Writer**

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LOS ANGELES - The Los Angeles County fraud hot line tipped off county officials to nearly 100 cases of fraud attributed to county workers over nine months, according to a new report.

County investigators opened 676 new cases between Oct. 1 and June 30 and found 91 cases of genuine fraud.

County investigator Guy Zelenski said hard economic times can prompt more fraud in the county.

"Whenever there's a greater financial need ... people tend to try to take more," he said Tuesday.

In the nine months covered by the report, Zelenski said he has seen an increase in cash thefts by county employees.

"Cash is easy to convert to your own use," he said. "We're seeing more of those."

Many county departments and offices accept cash payments, he said, including the treasurer, registrar-recorder, parks and recreation and child support.

"Sometimes those payments don't get deposited," Zelenski said.

"They usually start out as a small amount one time, maybe even with the intent of putting it back.

"Then they realize that, 'No one knows what I did,' and they end up taking it again and again and again."

The 91 fraud cases resulted in 13 county employees being fired, 18 being suspended, 10 resigning or retiring and three being sentenced to jail time.

In one cash theft case, a Department of Parks and Recreation employee stole a deposit bag with more than \$3,400.

The employee was not identified in the report.

Many of the frauds detailed in the report were relatively minor - for instance, two employees were reprimanded for doing schoolwork while on the county clock.

But a few were massive, costly frauds that resulted in prosecution and jail time for those involved.

At the high end, a county employee bilked the Department of Children and Family Services out of more than \$500,000.

The employee, who was fired, sentenced to three years in jail and ordered to pay \$557,000 in restitution, conspired with three child care providers who billed the county for care that was never provided.

The last time the county released its fraud report, misuse of county computers was a big problem, Zelenski said.

But the county installed a new system that blocks inappropriate sites, including pornography sites, from county computers.

"That's one of our ways of trying to be proactive," Zelenski said.

"We're saying, 'Let's take the opportunity away,' and they stop trying.

"We've seen a decrease in those types of cases."

jkoren@avpress.com