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Former L.A. County social worker pleads guilty in identity theft and tax scam

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A former Los Angeles County social worker has pleaded guilty to an identity theft and tax scam that involved the filing of federal tax returns in the names of 197 different people in an attempt to steal over \$2 million in refunds, authorities said.

Trang Van Dinh, 62, of El Monte pleaded guilty Thursday to two counts of filing false claims, according to the U.S. attorney's office. A sentencing hearing has been scheduled for June 27. Dinh faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in federal prison when he is sentenced on June 27.

Between 1999 and 2009, Dinh worked for the county's social services agency conducting home visits, interviews and other duties to determine whether applicants for public assistance programs like Cal Works were entitled to receive benefits, authorities said.

Dinh's job gave him access to the names and Social Security numbers of a large number of people who were part of his caseload, authorities said. He used that information to file false tax returns.

Dinh admitted that he filed fraudulent tax returns in 2009 and 2010, authorities said. Some of the tax returns claimed business losses, while others claimed nonexistent dependents.

All of the returns were filed electronically and requested direct deposit of the federal tax refunds to a bank account controlled by Dinh, the U.S. attorney's office said. Dinh then filed the false returns without the knowledge, consent or authorization of his victims.

The 197 tax returns filed by Dinh sought refunds totaling over \$2 million, authorities said. The Internal Revenue Service issued refund checks totaling over \$1 million.

Banks were alerted to the fraud and seized some of the funds but Dinh was able to access \$667,000, authorities said.

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-- Nate Jackson

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