



NEWS RELEASE

From New York State Inspector General
Catherine Leahy Scott

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INVESTIGATION FINDS WIDESPREAD ABUSE OF WORK-ISSUED EZ-PASS TAGS BY STATE OFFICE OF MENTAL HEALTH EMPLOYEES ON RANDALL'S AND WARDS ISLAND

Inspector General to date has secured \$276,000 in restitution for unauthorized charges

NEW YORK CITY - New York State Inspector General Catherine Leahy Scott released today an [investigative report](#) which found more than 100 current and former employees of two State-run psychiatric facilities on Randall's/Wards Island abused their government-issued E-ZPass accounts for hundreds of thousands of dollars in unauthorized personal use. As a result of the investigation, the Inspector General has secured more than \$275,000 in restitution from those current and former employees.

The Inspector General's investigation found that between 2008 and 2012, current and former employees of the state Office of Mental Health's (OMH) Manhattan Psychiatric Center and Kirby Forensic Psychiatric Center in New York City routinely used their state-issued E-ZPass accounts for personal and weekend travel, often hundreds of times each in any given year, and in some cases after leaving employment with the facilities. The E-ZPass tags at issue were restricted for use only on the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Bridge (formerly known as the Triborough Bridge) and meant only to be used to report to work at the facilities, which could only be accessed by crossing the toll bridge.

A toll is imposed only on those entering Randall's/Wards Island so most employees would be expected to use the work-issue tags once each workday, or less than 300 times per year. Some tags, however, were used two or three times as often.

"For any of these employees to think these E-ZPass tags came with the added benefit of taxpayer-subsidized personal and holiday travel, they were sorely mistaken," said Inspector General Catherine Leahy Scott. "My office will continue working with the Office of Mental Health to ensure that all unauthorized use is repaid, procedures are in place to end any future misuse, and that those who abused the system are appropriately disciplined."

Among the investigation's findings:

- A Social Worker used his State-issued E-ZPass on average more than 800 times per year, amounting to more than \$12,500 in improper charges.
- A Security Hospital Treatment Assistant used his E-ZPass tag 1,673 times during a two-year period in which he showed up for work on a single occasion, and that was to file his retirement papers. He used his State-issued E-ZPass while he was on sick leave, vacation, personal time, leave with pay and leave without pay, and after filing for retirement. He accumulated \$6,785 in improper charges.
- A Psychiatrist used his work-issued E-ZPass tag an average of 561 times each year for the five year period amounting to \$7,681 in improper charges.

- A Mental Health Therapy Aide routinely used his tag more than 425 per year, and 269 times in the 10 months after leaving employment with OMH amounting to \$4,482 in improper charges.
- A Safety and Security Officer used his tag to cover toll costs on the bridge 470 times during the year after leaving employment with OMH amounting to \$3,864 in improper charges.

The E-ZPass tags for commuting to the Island facilities were issued to the OMH employees by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (MTA-BTA) between 1996 and 2008. Employees hired since then have been required to pay the toll and then seek reimbursement by submitting time sheets and receipts. Employees previously issued the tags, however, were allowed to keep using them. Nearly 800 of the approximately 900 employees at the facilities maintained their E-ZPass usage throughout the period of the investigation.

Furthermore, the Inspector General further found that OMH did not conduct audits of EZ-Pass usage data provided by MTA-BTA, despite an agreement between the two agencies that required such an audit. Had an audit been performed, the misuse of the E-ZPasses could have been detected and prevented.

Also, the investigation's review of the E-ZPass records found that some physicians working at the OMH facilities on Randall's/Wards Island double-billed by claiming to still be at work at those facilities at the same time they claimed to be working at other facilities. OMH was asked to audit and investigate these physicians and recoup any unearned funds. The Inspector General has referred these physicians to the State Department of Health's Office of Professional Medical Conduct for appropriate action.

The Inspector General has recommended that:

- OMH and the MTA-BTA terminate OMH employees' free use of E-ZPasses for commuting to Randall's/Wards Island. In its place, OMH should incorporate those employees into an already existing system of reimbursement upon submission of a written claim and time records that support the claim.
- OMH should conduct a comprehensive audit of E-ZPass usage and recoup funds from those who engaged in misuse with violators subject to discipline and/or prosecution as warranted.

Inspector General Leahy Scott thanked MTA Inspector General Barry L. Kluger and his staff for their assistance in her investigation, and thanked the Office of Mental Health for their cooperation and assistance.

[Click here for a downloadable audio file of Inspector General Leahy Scott's comments.](#)

[Click here for a downloadable copy of the investigative report.](#)

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