



Riverside County District Attorney

# ***NEWS RELEASE***

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## **MORE THAN A DOZEN PEOPLE ARRESTED IN VEHICLE INSURANCE FRAUD CASE**

RIVERSIDE – Today, June 25, 2014, more than a dozen people were arrested in connection with an organized vehicle insurance fraud crime ring involving an auto body shop in Indio.

The owner of Lightning Auto Body in Indio, Joel Paredes Saldana, DOB: 3-24-92, of Coachella, was among the 13 people arrested in the case as of late morning on June 25, 2014. Saldana has been charged by the Riverside County District Attorney's Office with 16 felony counts of insurance fraud in case INF1401736. He is scheduled to be arraigned on Friday, June 27, 2014. The time and courtroom were not available as of this news release. The body shop stopped doing business earlier this year. All those arrested have been charged by the DA's Office with various crimes and under various court case numbers.

It is alleged that the scheme, organized by Saldana, resulted in 16 false insurance claims totaling more than \$314,000 loss to seven different auto insurance companies which paid out that amount in property damage.

Investigators with the California Department of Insurance first received information about the possible fraud in early 2013. The subsequent investigation by DOI and the Riverside County DA's Office revealed that Saldana reportedly recruited some friends and family members to pose as insured customers and, for as little as a \$500 bounty, file claims for traffic accidents that were either staged or never happened at all – also known as "phantom" accidents. All of the staged or phantom accidents were reported in the Coachella Valley.

Agencies involved in the June 25 sweep and arrests of the 13 defendants were investigators with the DA's Office, the state Department of Insurance and Riverside County sheriff's deputies.

The cases are being prosecuted by Deputy District Attorney Mark Zubiato of the DA's Insurance Fraud Unit.