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NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Re: **Fitzgerald case conviction**

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MODESTO, CALIFORNIA – Stanislaus County District Attorney James Brazelton announced today that Ronald Quinn Fitzgerald, age 33, of Modesto, pleaded Guilty on Friday November 21st, to felony conspiracy crimes after three days of jury trial. The case brings to a close a large identity theft ring that victimized Californians up and down the state between June 2002 and June 2003. Deputy District Attorney Beth O'Hara-Johnson prosecuted the case for the People.

Fitzgerald, along with three other co-defendants, conspired to commit various crimes including identity theft, credit card fraud, forgery and receiving stolen property. The other three Kimberly Brown, Samuel Torres, and Renee Baca, had already pleaded guilty to felonies on November 4, 2003. Brown pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit theft and was sentenced to three years in state prison. Both Torres and Baca pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit theft and were sentenced to jail terms and three years felony probation.

Police began investigating Brown and Torres after two cars they purchased with fraudulent credit cards were reported stolen. During the investigation, law enforcement officers found stockpiles of stolen credit cards, drivers licenses, computers, faxes, logs of Personal Identification Numbers (PIN), stolen checks and tools to make and alter

identifications. Hundreds of receipts from the Auto Zone automotive stores were also found.

Auto Zone had previously purchased Chief Auto Parts stores and had agreed to honor warranties on auto parts sold by Chief. Fitzgerald would obtain an alternator from various places such as wrecking yards, go to an Auto Zone store, claim that he had purchased the alternator at a Chiefs Auto Parts store. Auto Zone would then honor the warranty, thus creating a new warranty account. Fitzgerald and Renee Baca would then travel to a different Auto Zone store and return the part for cash or store credit.

In addition, while traveling up and down the state the group would fax forged credit card authorization forms to local hotels. They would then obtain rooms and incidentals at the hotel using stolen identifications and credit cards.

Locally, around February of 2003 the defendants faxed false authorizations to local hotels such as the DoubleTree and Best Western, stating that they were to be used to pay for rooms in the name of "The Family of Laci Peterson." These forms received less scrutiny by the hotels because of the high media attention that was present at that time in the search for murder victim Laci Peterson.

Fitzgerald pleaded guilty to all charges contained in the Information filed against him after three days of testimony. The District Attorney's office had numerous witnesses travel from as far south as Ventura and as north as Redding to testify as to the sophisticated scheme and was in the middle of presenting its case when Fitzgerald pleaded to all counts leveled against him. In taking the plea the District Attorney's office struck no deals with the defendant and are free to argue for the maximum prison term at Fitzgerald's sentencing hearing, which is currently set for December 23rd before Superior Court Judge Lori Begen.

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