



# SHUTTING DOWN BADGE FRAUD

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

JUST OVER TWO DECADES AGO, THE TEXAS Attorney General's Office had a very limited role in the law enforcement community. It wasn't until 1991 that the Texas Legislature authorized the attorney general to commission peace officers – but even then, the law only allowed the agency to commission up to five officers. Eight years later, the Texas Legislature lifted the cap, but by the time I took office in late 2002 there were only about three dozen officers serving the agency.

Since then our law enforcement focus has increased dramatically. Today, the agency has 140 commissioned peace officers. At the Attorney General's Office, our approach is somewhat unique. We work to fill gaps in the law enforcement field and have developed unique expertise in a variety of investigative fields. That helps ensure our work is not duplicative and that specially trained officers with statewide jurisdiction are available to help state and local agencies investigate complex cases that require specialized investigative experience.

For example, we've expanded the state's capacity to pursue white collar criminals who defraud the Texas Medicaid program, launched new statewide fugitive sex offender apprehension teams, and developed a

highly specialized computer forensics unit that is now the premier source of IT Forensics Analysis for state and local law enforcement agencies across Texas.

As the agency's peace officer ranks and law enforcement responsibilities have expanded, I've had the privilege of learning about great police work from some of the country's finest officers. From the outstanding officers who serve the Attorney General's Office to esteemed Texas Rangers to courageous patrol officers who police our state's most dangerous neighborhoods to deputy sheriffs in rural counties who spend every day keeping their small town communities safe, Texas is blessed to have more than 70,000 peace officers willing to devote their lives to protecting their fellow Texans.

Given the risks and sacrifices that these officers and their families endure for their communities, anyone who seeks to pad their own wallet by falsely and fraudulently seeking donations on behalf of Texas peace officers deserves to encounter some real law enforcement. And I'm proud to say that's exactly what we had in store for the folks who ran a badge fraud operation called the Texas Highway Patrol Association (THPA).

Late last year, the Attorney

General's Office charged the THPA, its affiliates – which included the Texas Highway Patrol Museum (THPM) – and the individuals who oversaw the organizations with fraudulently soliciting funds for the benefit of fallen state troopers and their families. We also successfully froze the organizations' accounts so that the defendants couldn't spend any more donated funds for their personal benefit. Thanks to the asset freeze, we were able to ensure the organizations' remaining funds were put to good use supporting fallen officers' families. By the end of the day, we shut down the organization and prevented its telephone solicitors from continuing their shameless quest for donations that never would have reached the intended beneficiaries.

While the THPM claimed that 100 percent of donated funds went directly to fallen officers' families, our investigation revealed that the real beneficiaries were the organizations' own executives. After scouring the defendants' financial records, our investigation found that THPM officials spent donated funds on veterinarian bills for an executive's prized cat, a trip to Sea World, tickets to Gold Class Cinema and even a flight to Hawaii.

So let's get this straight: The

THPA asked generous Texans to support the families of fallen peace officers, promised that 100 percent of the donations would go directly to survivors and claimed to provide these families a \$10,000 death benefit – but they actually spent the proceeds on trips to Hawaii and Sea World.

As the saying goes, don't mess with Texas. The THPA's executives had to learn that lesson the hard way. I'm proud to report that the THPA and its affiliates have now been shut down and the defendants' assets have been liquidated. The proceeds from the liquidation, together with the funds that were frozen last December, are being distributed to the families who lost a beloved officer but never received the \$10,000 death benefit they were promised. If there are any funds left over after the families have been properly paid, the remaining dollars will be transferred to the Texas Department of Public Safety Foundation, a legitimate charity that will make sure Texans' donations are put to good use. Meanwhile, the perpetrators responsible for this egregious case of badge fraud better be hard at work because they still have to pay off the \$2 million penalty they owe the State.

– November 2012