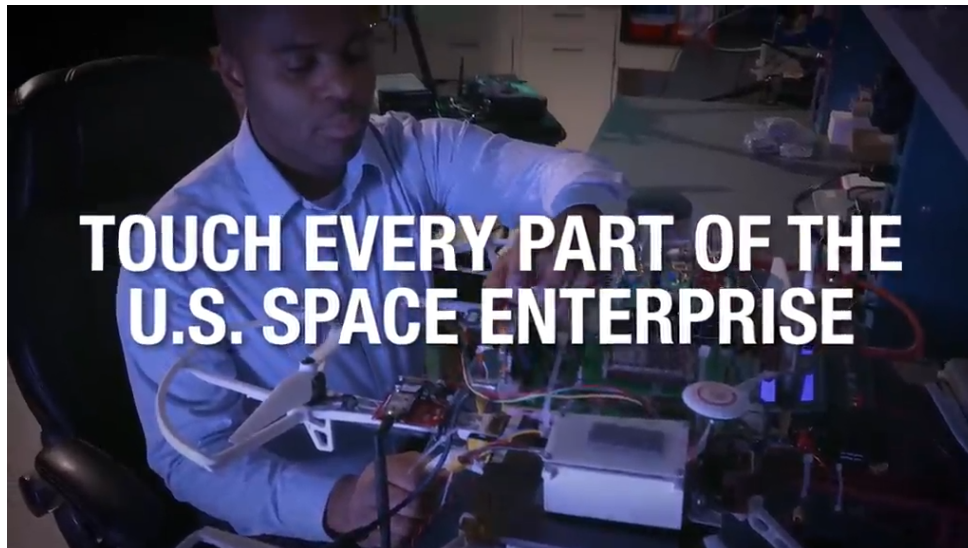


Two women were jailed Friday in Phenix City on charges they forged absentee ballot applications ahead of next week's municipal election, authorities said, continuing a long history of absentee voting irregularities.

Shelia Pritchett, 50, of Phenix City, was charged with two counts of second-degree forgery and two counts of absentee ballot fraud. Stephanie Elias, 31, of Columbus, was charged with four counts of second-degree forgery and four counts of absentee ballot fraud.

A grand jury Friday indicted both women and another suspect whom the authorities declined to identify because he or she apparently had not yet been arrested. The forgery and ballot fraud charges both are Class C felonies.

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Pritchett was being held on \$50,000 bond, jail officials said, while Elias was being held in lieu of \$100,000 bond.

Russell County District Attorney Ken Davis said the fraud came to light when officials discovered duplicate applications for absentee ballots. He said someone

The charges came despite a public warning law enforcement officials issued last month to deter potential fraudsters, and continued a long history of dubious absentee voting practices in Phenix City.

“I hope this brings to light how serious we are about wanting a fair election for everybody,” Russell County Sheriff Heath Taylor said. “I hate that these people got involved, but if you don’t take heed to us telling you we’re looking into, well so be it. We’re going to continue to investigate things that come to our attention.”

Davis and others have sought to emphasize the importance of absentee voting for folks who can’t make it to the polls, but said the most recent charges are yet another example of how it can be abused.

“If you want to manipulate the absentee ballot system in Alabama you can because the system is designed to let people vote, not to keep people from voting,” Davis said. “If there are people out there that want to skirt the system, if they want to use the system, it’s liberal enough, it’s open enough, that they can, and that’s happened in Russell County many times.”

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In the current case, Davis said the fraud was reported to him on Wednesday. Prosecutors worked quickly to present the allegations to a grand jury that already was meeting but hadn’t been scheduled to hear the case. “We added it because we thought it was important,” Davis said.

The suspects were working for a candidate in the municipal election, whom Davis declined to identify.

Absentee voting has long played an outsize role in Phenix City elections and has increasingly drawn scrutiny. Nine percent of votes cast were absentees in the 2008 municipal election and 17 percent were absentees in the runoff; the state average is between 3 percent and 4 percent.

week, we're going to be taking a really close look at all the absentee ballots."

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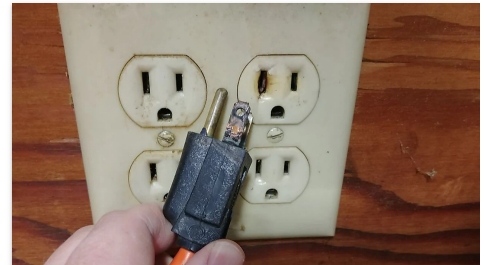
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