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D.A. BROWN: MENSA MEMBER CONVICTED OF WELFARE FRAUD

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown announced today that a member of Mensa, the high IQ society, has been convicted of welfare fraud while engaging in a reign of terror against his ex-girlfriend.

District Attorney Brown said, "Despite the defendant's high intelligence, his conduct was both criminal and dumb. New York City's social service safety net includes housing subsidies for people truly in need. In this case, the defendant used deceit and fraud to feign a need for rent support and will now be held accountable for ripping off the system for thousands of dollars."

The District Attorney identified the defendant as Steven Finkelstein, 58, of 345 East 205 Street in the Bronx. He was found guilty on Friday, February 3, 2006, of Welfare Fraud in the Third Degree and Grand Larceny in the Third Degree following a non-jury trial before Queens Supreme Court Justice Joel L. Blumenfeld. Sentencing was set for March 15, 2006, at which time the defendant faces up to 14 years in prison.

District Attorney Brown said that the defendant was indicted by a Queens Grand Jury in August 2003 and charged with forcing his then-girlfriend Estelle Margolin to allow him to use her Rego Park co-op apartment address to receive \$4,314 in welfare benefits for housing from the City's Human Resources Administration without actually living there. Evidence presented at trial showed that the defendant threatened to harm Ms. Margolin, her family, her cats and her neighbors so that she would sign a fraudulent lease so that he could receive a shelter allowance

According to District Attorney Brown, Ms Margolin met the defendant in 1998 through the Mensa organization, a group which limits its membership to those in the top 2 percent of IQs, and they lived together at her Rego Park residence. However, he ultimately began threatening her and threatening to destroy her property. To free herself from the defendant, Ms. Margolin agreed to rent an apartment for the defendant and to pay the rent with the understanding he would no longer threaten or harass her. Ms. Margolin ultimately signed a lease for a condominium located at 51-34 30th Avenue in Woodside, but by late 1999, she advised the defendant that she was no longer going to pay his rent. When the defendant declined to pay the rent himself, the building landlord and Ms, Margolin brought an eviction proceeding against the defendant.

Testimony at trial also showed that in early 2000, the defendant was still residing at the Woodside apartment and the eviction proceedings continued. During this time, the defendant was introduced to Barbara Segretto at a Mensa-related event and they began a romantic relationship. The defendant pushed, prodded, and coerced Ms Segretto into allowing him to move in with her. The defendant's campaign of "phone phreaking" – such as sending victims lengthy unrequested faxes, generating persistent and annoying electronic tones and manufacturing and creating bogus collect calls in both English and Spanish – against her friends, family, and business contacts was so intense that Ms. Segretto was forced to cave into his demands. The defendant was ultimately convicted in Bronx County of Grand Larceny by extortion for his actions against Ms. Segretto.

Senior Assistant District Attorney Christine Burke of the District Attorney's Economic and Environmental Crimes Bureau, conducted the investigation. Assisting in the investigation were Supervising Investigator Mona Ayala Lake and former Investigator Louis Fortunat, of the New York City Human Resources Administration.

Senior Assistant District Attorney Neil F. Gitin, of the District Attorney's Economic and Environmental Crimes Bureau, prosecuted the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Gregory Pavlides, Bureau Chief, and Diane M. Peress, Deputy Bureau Chief, and the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Peter A. Crusco and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Linda M. Cantoni.

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Note to Editors: Press release e-version posted at www.queensda.org.