

Los Angeles: FBI Accused of Seizing \$85 Million from Safe Deposit Boxes without Legal Basis

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Beverly Hills: A class-action suit claims FBI exceeded its search warrant in March and took possession of the contents of about 800 safe deposit boxes kept with storage provider US Private Vaults (USPV), which was indicted for conspiracy to sell drugs and launder money. However, the owners of the boxes are not accused of committing any crimes. The search warrant only authorized the FBI to inspect the safe deposit boxes to “identify their owners in order to notify them” about claiming their property. Owners’ boxes have been seized under civil forfeiture proceedings and the civil forfeiture notices said the feds can deny return of the items if it judges the responses are not filled out “correctly.”

Hundreds of people storing valuables in safe deposit boxes in Los Angeles may never see their cash, precious metals and heirlooms again, unless a federal judge intervenes in the next week.

Several are suing the government for seizing the contents of about 800 boxes as part of a March raid of the storage provider, U.S. Private Vaults (USPV), which was indicted for conspiracy to sell drugs and launder money.

The Institute for Justice (IJ) is seeking class-action status for a May lawsuit by several owners alleging “shocking, unconscionable, and unconstitutional” behavior by the government. IJ attorney Robert Frommer **accused** the feds of an “\$85 million cash grab”

from people who were not accused of wrongdoing.

The civil forfeiture notices “do not identify *any* legal basis,” namely the “*specific* offense,” to justify each forfeiture, and thus violate due process rights, the public interest law firm said in an **amended complaint** filed last week. “Box holders thus do not know whether the government is accusing them of drug crimes, money laundering, structuring” or any crime at all.

“While this case is similar to many of our other forfeiture actions, it is also bigger because the government is trying to forfeit hundreds of safe deposit boxes all at one go,” IJ senior attorney Rob Johnson told Just the News.

It’s also unusual for the government to keep fighting “tooth and nail” after innocent people contest the forfeitures, he wrote in an email. The feds appear intent to “make all these box holders prove their own innocence to get their property back” with no evidence of a crime.

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