

Cops accuse five of fleecing disabled of \$1.1m

By **DAVID MURRAY**, NATIONAL CRIME CORRESPONDENT

12:00AM MAY 23, 2019

Federal police say they will hunt down offenders involved in “despicable” scams on people with disabilities, after busting an alleged organised crime syndicate suspected of defrauding the - National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Police say the syndicate took money “directly out of the pockets of NDIS participants”, with funds suspected to have been used to fund lavish lifestyles, including the purchase of luxury cars.

Five people were arrested in western Sydney yesterday, accused of controlling and exploiting three NDIS providers that fraudulently claimed \$1.1 million in NDIS payments from more than 70 people on disability plans or those managing their affairs. Investigations are continuing, with the Australian Federal Police saying more than 100 other potential victims have been identified in connection to the three entities allegedly controlled by the syndicate — Universal Group Australia, Reliance Disability Services and United Mission.

The providers allegedly massively overcharged for services such as household construction or cleaning, or in other cases charged without completing the work, draining people’s allocated NDIS funds.

It is understood some carers or participants discovered they had been defrauded only when they couldn’t pay for other essential services.

The AFP said it had seized a Porsche Cayenne, Audi A3 and Mercedes E63 suspected of being purchased with funds fraudulently obtained by syndicate members. AFP acting commander Mark McIntyre said the syndicate allegedly harassed and intimidated people with disabilities and their family members.

“It took money directly out of the pockets of NDIS participants, reducing their ability to obtain crucial assistance and services to help them lead their lives,” he said.

“Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case, and we will continue to work with our taskforce partners to identify those preying on our needy and bring them to account for their selfish and despicable actions.”

A joint statement by the AFP, Department of Human Services and the National Disability Insurance Agency said the three entities were believed to have received more than \$2.6m in NDIS payments since December 2017. “Further inquiries are required to determine whether these payments are legitimate or fraudulent,” the statement reads.

Alaedine Rifai, 40, Amal Hilmi, 35, Alhassane Hilmi, 27, Mostafa Hilmi, 30, and Michelle Ross, 27, were arrested at residences in the western Sydney suburbs of Lurnea and Liverpool yesterday morning and were facing fraud and proceeds of crime charges.

Universal Group Australia is listed as a NDIS registered provider in NSW as of the end of March, involved in home modification, household tasks and assisted travel and transport.

Reliance Disability Services was also listed as a registered provider as of the end of March, involved in household tasks. Reliance’s website says it “takes pride in providing participants with a flexible pathway to wellness” and includes glowing testimonials for cleaning work and lawn mowing.

The NDIS website says registered providers “have met requirements regarding qualifications, approvals, experience and capacity for the approved supports”.

Syndicate members are suspected to have registered another four entities as NDIS providers, some of which are understood to have also sought payments.

The arrests followed a six-month investigation by the NDIS Fraud Taskforce, comprising members of the AFP, NDIA and human services department.

DAVID MURRAY, NATIONAL CRIME CORRESPONDENT

David Murray is The Australian's National Crime Correspondent. He was previously at The Courier-Mail and is the author of the *The Murder of Allison Baden-Clay*.