A DeLand Woman Paid $15,000 to Fake Deputies. Investigators Say the Calls Came From a Georgia Prison

Vera Faust, 43, of Athens, Georgia, is the latest person Volusia County deputies have hauled back to Florida in a fake arrest warrant scheme that investigators say inmates run on smuggled phones.

By Frank McKenna | October 11, 2026



Volusia County deputies with Vera Faust in video released by the sheriff's office. Video: Volusia Sheriff's Office

The call that cost a DeLand woman $15,000 sounded like it came from her own county sheriff. Investigators say it came from a Georgia prison.

The callers told her they were with the Volusia County Sheriff's Office. She had to send money, they said, or she would be arrested.

She sent $15,000, according to Sheriff Mike Chitwood. Now Vera Faust, 43, of Athens, Georgia, has been extradited to Volusia County and charged with fraud.

Chitwood said Faust and three others took part in the scheme. Detectives got most of the money back, FOX 35 Orlando reported.

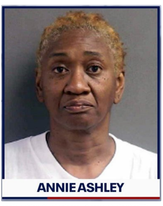
Inmates make the calls, relatives collect the cash

Investigators believe inmates at a Georgia prison ran the operation and used people on the outside to collect and move the stolen money. Detectives think the inmates use phones and other technology to talk with those helpers.

Faust is at least the third person arrested and brought to Florida in connection with the scheme, according to FOX 35. Just over a week earlier, deputies arrested Annie Ashley, 61, of Atlanta, in a similar fake jury duty scam.



Vera Faust, 43, of Athens, Georgia. Photo: Volusia Sheriff's Office



Annie Ashley, 61, of Atlanta. Photo: Volusia Sheriff's Office

Ashley was charged with grand theft, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. Chitwood told the paper the scheme runs out of two state lockups, Calhoun State Prison and Wheeler Correctional Institution.

Volusia deputies have arrested roughly two dozen people tied to these prison scams in the past year, the AJC reported. Most of them are relatives or friends of the inmates running it.

How investigators say the scheme works

The inmates call victims, many of them older, and say they missed jury duty and now have a warrant, according to Chitwood and Sgt. Julian Elmazi of the sheriff's financial crimes unit. Victims are then pushed to pull out cash and feed it into Bitcoin ATMs.

Elmazi told the AJC that phones get smuggled into the prisons, sometimes by guards and sometimes by drones. Detectives follow the money through payment apps and crypto exchanges until it lands with someone they can arrest.

How the fake warrant scam moves money out of Florida

Steps as described by the Volusia County Sheriff's Office in recent cases.

1. **An inmate calls on a smuggled phone**
   The caller claims to be a deputy or a lieutenant with the local sheriff's office.
2. **The victim hears about a warrant**
   The usual story is a missed jury duty date and an arrest coming soon.
3. **Pay now or go to jail**
   Victims are pressed to withdraw cash, often for deposit at a Bitcoin ATM.
4. **A helper outside collects it**
   The money lands in an account run by a relative or friend of the inmate.
5. **Detectives trace it back**
   Investigators follow the payments to the helper, get a warrant and bring that person to Florida.

Sources: The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, FOX 35 Orlando, WFTV

In late September, WSB-TV in Atlanta reported that a DeLand woman lost $15,000 in Bitcoin to this kind of call and that investigators recovered about $12,000. Reports have not made clear whether she is the same victim in Faust's case.

A sheriff losing patience with Georgia

Chitwood has been blunt about where he thinks the blame lies. In a video last month, he told Georgia officials to wake up and deal with the scams their prisoners are running, using language that doesn't print well.

He was just as direct about what people should do when the phone rings. Real deputies do not call demanding money to cancel a warrant, he said, so the answer is simple.

> "Use an expletive and hang up."
>
> Volusia County Sheriff Mike Chitwood, to FOX 35 Orlando

The Georgia Department of Corrections told the AJC that contraband phones are an ongoing fight. "The cell phone and drone challenge affects every state's correctional system," spokesperson Joan Heath said.

Heath said the department has worked with Volusia County to identify inmates and gather evidence. The AJC noted that Georgia lawmakers gave the department an extra $600 million last year.

The same playbook, case after case

Federal prosecutors have already shown how far this kind of scheme can reach. In January, a jury in Albany, Georgia, convicted two Calhoun State Prison inmates, Joey Amour Jackson and Lance Riddle, of running a nationwide fake jury duty scam.

Prosecutors documented 119 victims and more than $464,920 in losses, mostly paid in gift cards read over the phone. Victims were told they were under a gag order and could not talk about their warrants.

Some women were told to undress and record themselves, then got explicit messages and threats, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office. "Not even prison cells prevented these criminals from harming dozens of innocent people," said Paul Brown, the FBI's special agent in charge in Atlanta.

Recent arrests tied to Georgia prison phone scams

Cases where Florida or federal authorities have publicly named suspects.

Person	From	What happened	Reported
Lakesha Heard, 47	Atlanta	Charged with grand theft and conspiracy after a Volusia victim put $9,300 in a Bitcoin ATM	Aug. 2025
Joey Amour Jackson and Lance Riddle	Calhoun State Prison	Convicted of wire fraud and money laundering conspiracy, 119 victims, $464,920 in losses	Jan. 2026
Annie Ashley, 61	Atlanta	Charged with grand theft in a fake jury duty scam	Sept. 2026
Vera Faust, 43	Athens, Ga.	Charged with fraud after a DeLand woman sent $15,000	Oct. 2026

Sources: WFTV, U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Georgia, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, FOX 35 Orlando

In the Heard case, the caller claimed to be a lieutenant with the Volusia sheriff's office, WFTV reported. Detectives traced the $9,300 to her account, and WFTV reported she was linked to a fraud ring run by a gang inside a Georgia prison.

What happens next

Faust faces a fraud charge in Volusia County, and the case has not gone to trial. Chitwood has said more arrests are coming.

The inmates at the center of the scheme are already behind bars. So far, the people paying for it in Florida courtrooms are the ones who collected the money on the outside.

Sources

FOX 35 Orlando, October 6, 2026
Hoodline, October 7, 2026
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, September 28, 2026
WSB-TV, September 27, 2026
WFTV, August 20, 2025
U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Georgia, January 9, 2026