

CALIFORNIA

Federal charges against 40 pilots They're accused of hiding disabilities

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Forty airplane pilots in Northern and Central California were charged Monday with concealing serious medical conditions, such as schizophrenia, drug addiction and heart problems, that could have disqualified them from flying.

An 18-month investigation found that the pilots were collecting Social Security disability benefits for conditions they failed to disclose in their license applications, federal authorities said.

Most of the 40 were private pilots, but some had commercial licenses and one was a commercial airline pilot, said Patty Pontello, spokeswoman for the U. S. attorney's office in Sacramento. No instances of actual unsafe flying were alleged.

Thirty pilots were indicted by federal grand juries on charges of making false statements to a government agency, and similar charges have been filed by prosecutors against the other 10 defendants, said prosecutors' offices in Sacramento and San Francisco. The Federal Aviation Administration said it has revoked 14 pilots' licenses and notified the other 26 that their licenses and medical certificates needed to obtain a license to fly may be suspended.

"The fraud and falsification allegedly committed by these individuals is extremely serious and adversely affects the public interest in air safety," said Nicholas Sabatini, the FAA's associate administrator for aviation safety.

Officials said the records of 40,000 pilots in Northern California were reviewed. Many pilots were found collecting Social Security disability benefits, but agents focused on the most serious physical and mental disabilities, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, drug or alcohol addiction, disabling back conditions, and severe heart conditions, the prosecutors' offices said.

A review by the FAA's medical staff determined that, in all 40 cases, disclosure of the disabilities "might or would have disqualified them" from obtaining a medical certificate needed for a pilot's license, prosecutors said.

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