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Thursday, August 25, 2016

Little Rock Woman Pleads Guilty to Conspiracy in Scheme to Steal Feeding Program Funds

LITTLE ROCK---Christopher R. Thyer, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas, announced today that Maria Carmen Nelson, 50, of Little Rock, pled guilty to Count I of the Indictment charging her with conspiring to commit wire fraud. The charge relates to a conspiracy to fraudulently obtain United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) program funds intended to feed children in low income areas during the school year.

Today's plea hearing took place in Little Rock before United States District Judge J. Leon Holmes. Judge Holmes will sentence Nelson at a later date.

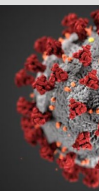
On October 7, 2015, a Federal Grand Jury indicted Nelson on charges of wire fraud as part of a scheme to fraudulently obtain USDA program funds. The USDA funds the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program, which includes an at-risk after school component. In Arkansas, the feeding programs are administered by the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS). Sponsors who want to participate in the feeding programs must submit an application to DHS for approval. Once approved, they can provide meals as part of the feeding program and be reimbursed based on the number of eligible meals they serve.

According to facts read at the plea hearing, Nelson operated as a sponsor for a feeding program through an organization called "Securing Our Future" between approximately March 2012 and March 2015 with approved Sites in Little Rock and Malvern, Arkansas. Nelson was recruited to participate by a DHS employee who worked in the section that oversaw the feeding programs. Nelson and the DHS employee both had an understanding it would be a fraudulent scheme, with each taking a portion of the proceeds. As part of the scheme, the number of children who



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were fed at Nelson’s sites would be inflated. Out of the money Nelson received as a result of the inflated claims, Nelson would pay cash back to the DHS employee.

Nelson received a total of approximately \$575,917.76 from the feeding program in payment for fraudulent claims. Out of this money deposited into her account, Nelson withdrew sums of cash and paid that to the DHS employee. The DHS employee is no longer employed at DHS.

The statutory penalty for conspiracy to commit wire fraud is not more than 20 years’ imprisonment, not more than a \$250,000 fine, or both, and not more than 3 years supervised release.

The investigation is ongoing and is being conducted by the USDA-Office of Inspector General, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigations, and United States Marshals service. If you are aware of any fraudulent activity regarding these feeding programs, please email that information to USAARE.FeedingProgramFraud@usdoj.gov.

Topic(s):
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Component(s):
USAO - Arkansas, Eastern

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