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Tuesday, January 31, 2017

Little Rock Woman Sent to Prison for Role in Scheme to Steal USDA Funds Intended to Feed Hungry Children

LITTLE ROCK—Christopher R. Thyer, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas, announced Tuesday that United States District Court Judge J. Leon Holmes sentenced Maria Carmen Nelson, 50, of Little Rock, to prison for her role in a widespread scheme to steal money intended for feeding children in low income areas.

Judge Holmes sentenced Nelson, who pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit wire fraud on August 25, 2016, to 30 months' imprisonment, to be followed by three years of supervised release. She was also ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$575,917.76.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) feeding programs in Arkansas are administered through the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS). Sponsors who want to participate in the feeding programs must submit an application to DHS for approval. After they are approved, they can provide meals as part of the feeding programs, and they are reimbursed for the eligible meals they serve.

Nelson is the fifth defendant to be sentenced for her involvement in a scheme to fraudulently obtain USDA program funds intended to feed children in low income areas. Other defendants sentenced include: Kattie Jordan, sentenced to 63 months' imprisonment on March 15, 2016; Reuben Nims, sentenced to 21 months' imprisonment on November 2, 2016; Tonique Hatton, sentenced to 108 months' imprisonment on January 4, 2017; and James Franklin, sentenced to 24 months' imprisonment on January 10, 2017. Gladys Waits, Christopher Nichols, Waymon Weeams, Francine Leon, Michael Lee, Alexis Young, and Erica Warren have all pleaded guilty to conspiring to defraud USDA feeding programs and are awaiting



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sentencing. Jacqueline Mills, Dortha Harper, and Anthony Waits are scheduled for trial on March 27, 2017, before United States District Judge James M. Moody, Jr.

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. As part of the fraudulent scheme, the number of children who were fed at Nelson's sites were 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. After this money deposited into her account, Nelson withdrew sums of cash and that she paid to the DHS employee. The DHS employee is no longer employed at DHS.

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. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Jana K. Harris, Allison W. Bragg, and Cameron McCree.

If you are aware of any fraudulent activity regarding feeding programs, please email that information to USAARE.FeedingProgramFraud@usdoj.gov.

Topic(s):
Public Corruption

Component(s):
USAO - Arkansas, Eastern

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