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Tuesday, September 6, 2016

Third Arkansas DHS Employee Pleads Guilty 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 today that Tonique Hatton, 39, of North Little Rock, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to commit wire fraud and one count of receipt of a bribe in connection with USDA funds intended to feed children in low income areas during the school year and summer.

Today's plea hearing took place in Little Rock before United States District Judge James M. Moody, Jr., who will sentence Hatton at a later date.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funds the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program, which includes an at-risk after school component. USDA also funds the Summer Food Service Program. 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. After they are approved, they can provide meals as part of the feeding program, and they are reimbursed for the eligible meals they serve.

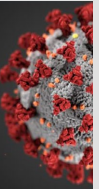
Hatton worked for DHS, and her responsibilities included processing applications from sponsors who applied to participate in the feeding programs, determining their eligibility, and approving their proposed feeding site(s).

Two of Hatton's co-defendants, Jacqueline Mills and Kattie Jordan, were sponsors of feeding programs from approximately January 2012 to August 2014. Mills was a sponsor and had approved sites in cities including Helena and Marianna, Arkansas. Mills' programs received more than \$2.5 million in federal funds from DHS. Jordan



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was a sponsor and had approved sites in cities including Dermott, Dumas, Eudora, and Lake Village, Arkansas. Jordan’s programs received more than \$3.5 million in federal funds from DHS.

Hatton was responsible for approving the feeding programs for Mills and Jordan at various times between January 2012 and August 2014. Mills and Jordan made bribe payments to Hatton to ensure those programs were approved. Some bribes were provided directly by checks made payable to Hatton or indirectly through payments to her relatives.

In exchange for these bribe payments, Hatton, knowing that these sponsors would submit inflated claims, would still approve their applications which contained the location of the sites and the maximum number of children who would be fed at each site.

During the time in the pending Indictment, Mills and Jordan submitted inflated claims for reimbursement to DHS, claiming that more children were fed at their sites than were actually fed. Because their applications had been approved for a specified number of children that could be fed at the sites, inflated claims were approved and paid by DHS without further scrutiny. Hatton also helped Mills and Jordan avoid DHS’s detection of the fraud.

Hatton is the ninth person to plead guilty concerning the theft of USDA feeding program funds for children. Previous charges filed in this investigation detail alleged fraud involving over \$10 million in USDA feeding program funds.

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 three years supervised release. The statutory penalty for accepting bribes is not more than 10 years, not more than a \$250,000 fine, or both, and not more than three 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. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Jana Harris, Allison Bragg, and Cameron McCree.

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

Updated September 7, 2016

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