



Department of Justice

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Middle District of Alabama

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**HURRICANE KATRINA FRAUDSTER FOUND GUILTY OF 22 COUNTS TODAY.
FACES A MINIMUM SENTENCE OF 34 YEARS IN A FEDERAL PRISON.**

MONTGOMERY, Ala.—A Montgomery woman, Bernetta LaShay Willis, was found guilty of 22 counts involving the filing of false claims for Hurricane Katrina disaster assistance, theft of funds intended for victims of Hurricane Katrina, threatening a witness from another Hurricane Katrina case, drug distribution, weapons charges, and lying to federal authorities, U.S. Attorney Leura G. Canary announced today.

Because of these convictions, the minimum sentence Willis is facing is 34 years in federal prison. Even if Willis is only sentenced to the mandatory minimum sentence, this will be the longest sentence handed down for a Hurricane Katrina fraud in the country, according to the Hurricane Katrina Task Force.

Willis initially was investigated for fraudulently obtaining disaster assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency ("FEMA") in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In total Willis assisted in stealing or stole approximately \$50,000 in money intended for Katrina victims. On at least one application, Willis used another person's social security number to file the claim.

Prior to her indictment on FEMA charges, however, Willis threatened another witness who was to testify against her about her FEMA claims. Willis brandished a firearm when threaten the witness. An arrest warrant was issued for Willis, and a search warrant was obtained for her residence. While executing the search warrant, authorities discovered marijuana packaged for distribution and more guns in the house.

After a four day trial, which began on March 23, 2007, in front of Chief U.S. District Court Judge Mark Fuller, a jury found Willis guilty of 22 counts charged in the Indictment, including conspiracy to file false claims, false claims, theft of government property, aggravated identity theft, threatening a witness, drug distribution, two charges related to use of firearms, and false statements to the U.S. Marshals.

U.S. Attorney Leura G. Canary stated, "I am very pleased with the jury's verdict in this case. Ms. Willis stole money set aside for victims of a natural disaster through misrepresentations and false claims. She then attempted to cover up her conduct through threats and intimidation, brandishing a firearm and threatening to kill a witness against her. Her conviction and the lengthy sentence she faces sends a real message to others contemplating fraud against the federal government."

The United States Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Alabama is a member of

the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, created by Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales in September 2005 to deter, detect, investigate and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes. The Task Force, chaired by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of DOJ's Criminal Division, is comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, and United States Attorneys' Offices from the Gulf Coast region and nationwide.

This matter was investigated by Edward B. Kleppinger, III, of the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, with the assistance of James Tynan and David Dirmeyer of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, VaLaine Jones of the Social Security Administration, Office of Inspector General, Trevor Fenwick of the United States Secret Service, and Devin Whittle of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Christopher A. Snyder with the assistance of Assistant United States Attorneys Susan Redmond and Andrew O. Schiff. Thus far, the Middle District of Alabama has charged a total of 18 Hurricane Katrina and Rita fraud-related cases involving 19 different defendants.

If anyone has information concerning possible fraud being committed during the post-Katrina recovery effort, please call either the Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General Fraud Hotline at 1-866-720-5721.

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