



Department of Justice

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FORT WORTH WOMAN SENTENCED FOR STEALING FEMA FUNDS

Defendant Took Advantage of a Hurricane Katrina Evacuee

DALLAS, Texas --- Sheila Harris, who was convicted by a federal jury in July on one count of theft of government property and one count of bank burglary, was sentenced today by U.S. District Judge John McBryde to 12 months and one day, announced U.S. Attorney Richard B. Roper of the Northern District of Texas. She was ordered to surrender to the Bureau of Prisons on Dec. 1, 2006.

Harris surrendered to federal authorities on April 27, 2006, on charges outlined in a federal criminal complaint filed two days earlier. A federal grand jury in Fort Worth, Texas, returned a two-count indictment on May 23, 2006, charging her with one count of theft of government property and one count of bank burglary.

At trial, the government showed that Willie Jean Payne advised the Fort Worth Police Department in December 2005 that she was a hurricane evacuee and had been sent a disaster assistance check from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the amount of \$21,242. She explained that she had been in Mississippi attending her husband's funeral in November 2005 when Sheila Harris opened a letter addressed to her with the FEMA check enclosed. Harris deposited the check without Ms. Payne's permission, depositing \$10,000 into Harris's daughter's bank account and the remainder, \$11,242, into Harris's bank account.

The government also presented evidence at trial that Sheila Harris had been Ms. Payne's food stamp administrator. With financial assistance from another individual, Harris had taken in Ms. Payne for a couple of weeks after Ms. Payne's husband was placed in a hospital.

In September 2005, Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales created the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, designed to deter, investigate and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes

such as charity fraud, identity theft, procurement fraud and insurance fraud. The Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force – chaired by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division – includes the FBI, the U.S. Inspectors General community, the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys and others.

U.S. Attorney Richard Roper praised the investigative efforts of the U. S. Secret Service and the Fort Worth Police Department. The case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Camille Sparks and Paul Gartner.

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