



# Department of Justice

United States Attorney Deborah J. Rhodes

Southern District of Alabama

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**ALABAMA RESIDENT INDICTED BY FEDERAL GRAND JURY OF  
DEFRAUDING FEMA OF \$277,377 AND AGGRAVATED IDENTITY THEFT**

MOBILE, Ala. – Lawanda T. Williams, also known as Lawanda Johnson, was indicted today by a grand jury on federal FEMA fraud charges, U.S. Attorney Deborah J. Rhodes of the Southern District of Alabama announced today.

Williams, 32, of Jackson, Ala., was charged in a 66-count federal indictment with making false claims to the government, mail fraud, wire fraud and aggravated identity theft. Williams is charged with making a number of false and fraudulent applications for disaster assistance from FEMA following Hurricane Katrina. The investigation was conducted by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Inspector General, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

The indictment alleges that from Sept. 8, 2005 through May 11, 2006, Williams applied by telephone for disaster benefits from FEMA following Hurricane Katrina. Using false Social Security numbers and variations of her name and addresses in Gulfport, Pascagoula and Biloxi, Miss., as well as addresses in Jackson, Ala. and New Orleans, Williams claimed that her primary residence had been damaged. The indictment further alleges that at the time of Hurricane Katrina, Williams lived in Jackson, and not at any of the addresses she claimed as her damaged primary residence.

Williams allegedly received \$277,377 from FEMA as a result of the fraudulent claims, which she used to purchase real estate, a mobile home, automobiles, electronics and other personal property. If convicted, the proceeds of the alleged fraud would be subject to forfeiture to the United States.

Williams was arrested on July 18, 2006 on a federal complaint charging her with wire and mail fraud in connection with one of the applications. U.S. Magistrate Judge William E. Cassady ordered that she be detained in custody pending trial. Assistant U.S. Attorney Sean Costello is prosecuting the case.

Mail fraud and wire fraud each carry maximum penalties of 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Making false claims to the government is punishable by a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Conviction of aggravated identity theft carries a mandatory two year sentence consecutive to any other sentence imposed.

“We have entered a new hurricane season, and the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force is continuing its investigations of those people who took advantage of last year’s relief efforts to profit personally and fraudulently,” stated U.S. Attorney Deborah J. Rhodes. “Those who use fraud to take relief money intended for hurricane victims will be aggressively prosecuted.”

To date, 11 individuals have been charged in the Southern District of Alabama with violations related to hurricane relief funds.

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 members from the FBI, the Federal Trade Commission, the Postal Inspector’s Office and the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, among others.

Anyone with information about fraudulent activity is encouraged to report it immediately through the Hurricane Relief Fraud Hotline at 1-866-720-5721, or via email at [katrinafraud@dodig.mil](mailto:katrinafraud@dodig.mil).

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