



Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Southern District of Texas

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HOUSTON RESIDENT SENTENCED TO PRISON FOR FILING MULTIPLE FRAUDULENT CLAIMS WITH FEMA FOR HURRICANE KATRINA AND RITA ASSISTANCE

Eighteenth defendant sentenced to prison in the Southern District for FEMA fraud

(HOUSTON, TX) - Ernest Tutt, Jr., 23, of Houston, was sentenced to 18 months in prison for mail fraud in connection with his filing of multiple fraudulent FEMA claims for Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita benefits, United States Attorney Donald J. DeGabrielle, Jr. today.

At a hearing this morning, Judge Lee Rosenthal sentenced Tutt to an eighteen month prison term and ordered him to pay \$20,000 in restitution to FEMA. Judge Rosenthal also sentenced Tutt to a three year supervised release term upon completion of his prison term. Immediately following today's hearing, Judge Rosenthal ordered Tutt into federal custody to begin serving his sentence.

Tutt, along with his roommate Curtis Caldwell, was responsible for filing a total of 39 fraudulent claims for emergency hurricane assistance. Of the 39, Tutt personally filed seventeen of the claims. Tutt used his own first and last name and simply changing the middle initial on the claims, however, after using his Social Security number in the first claim, he started using Social Security numbers belonging to others in an attempt to avoid detection of the multiple claims. The claims Tutt filed listed damaged primary residences in New Orleans (for the Katrina claims) and Lake Charles (for the Rita claims). In response to these seventeen claims, FEMA mailed Tutt ten separate \$2,000 expedited assistance checks based on Tutt's claimed emergency need for food, clothing, and shelter. Subsequent visits to the addresses by FEMA contract inspectors revealed that some of the addresses did not exist and, for those that did exist, that Tutt had never resided there. In fact Tutt lived in Houston throughout 2005 when Katrina and Rita struck.

Tutt pleaded guilty to mail fraud in February 2007. Curtis Caldwell has also been convicted of mail fraud and has been sentenced to 24 months in prison, without parole, and ordered to pay restitution to FEMA.

A total of forty-nine individuals has been charged in the Southern District of Texas with fraud relating to Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Rita. Eighteen of the twenty-eight defendants sentenced thus far have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment.

The United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas is a member of the Department of Justice's Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, created by Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales to deter, detect and prosecute unscrupulous individuals who try to take advantage of the Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita disasters. Headed by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher, the Task Force is comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement investigating agencies and the United States Attorney's Offices in the Gulf Coast

region and nationwide.

This case was investigated by the United States Postal Inspection Service, with assistance from the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, the Social Security Administration Office of Inspector General and the Small Business Administration Office of Inspector General. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Gregg Costa.

Anyone suspecting criminal activity involving disaster assistance programs can make an anonymous report by calling the toll-free Hurricane Relief Fraud Hotline, 1-866-720-5721, 24 hours a day, seven days a week until further notice. Information can also be emailed to the inspector general at dhsorghotline@dhs.gov or sent by surface mail, with as many details as possible, to: Department of Homeland Security; Washington, DC. 20528; Attn: Office of Inspector General Hotline.

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