

Caddo Parish Commissioner and Sister Plead Guilty to Federal Charges Just Days Before Trial Set to Begin

Western District of Louisiana

SHREVEPORT, La. - Acting United States Attorney Alexander C. Van Hook announced that two defendants scheduled to begin trial Monday, November 8, 2021, each entered guilty pleas this evening before United States District Judge Elizabeth E. Foote.

Lynn D. Cawthorne, 54, a Caddo Parish Commissioner and resident of Shreveport, along with his sister, **Belena C. Turner**, 50, also of Shreveport, each appeared in United States District Court this evening and pleaded guilty to wire fraud in connection with their involvement in a scheme to defraud the Food and Nutrition Service, an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) which administers the Child Nutrition Programs. Cawthorne also pleaded guilty to a charge of aiding and assisting in making and subscribing a false tax return in connection with a separate indictment that was returned by a federal grand jury against him in December 2019.

According to information introduced at the hearing, the Child Nutrition Programs administered by the USDA include the Summer Feeding Service Program (SFSP). The SFSP was established to ensure that children in low-income areas continue to receive nutritious meals when school is not in session during the summer. In Louisiana, the SFSP is administered by the Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) Division of Nutrition Support. Meals are prepared and served by SFSP sponsors who are required to follow rules and regulations issued by the USDA and LDOE.

To participate in the SFSP, sponsors are required to submit a "sponsor application" that includes, among other things, a budget estimating revenues and expenses related to the feeding program. Sponsors are also required to submit a "site application" listing the physical address where meals will be served. In the application, sponsors agree to oversee the administration of SFSP at each approved site. Based on guidelines published by the USDA, LDOE regulations require sponsors to maintain certain records, including but not limited to, daily site records documenting the number of Eligible Meals served to Eligible Persons. Sponsors are reimbursed for expenses after electronically submitting claims to LDOE certifying that each claim is true and accurate. Sponsors can also receive an advance of funds to help pay approved expenses.

In 2013, Cawthorne was president of United Citizens and Neighborhoods, Inc. (UCAN) and Turner was the executive director. In 2013, Turner and Cawthorne caused UCAN to apply to the LDOE to participate in the SFSP at various feeding sites in the Western District of Louisiana. In late May 2013, Cawthorne created Harvest Catering, Inc. (Harvest Catering) in the name of an unindicted co-conspirator. However, Cawthorne maintained actual control and decision making over Harvest Catering's financial activity. More specifically, Cawthorne drafted Harvest Catering checks and maintained a Harvest Catering debit card.

Turner and Cawthorne represented to the LDOE that Harvest Catering would be providing catering services to UCAN at its SFSP sites. In a claim for reimbursement, the defendants submitted a false claim which resulted in a wire being sent on May 20, 2013. On that same date, the LDOE electronically transferred \$33,080.78 to UCAN's bank account using a wire communication traveling in interstate commerce through the Western District of Louisiana. On May 24, 2013, Turner drafted and eventually negotiated a check made payable to a non-profit under her control called Dreamkeepers Academy. In addition, on May 30, 2013, Cawthorne drafted a UCAN check made payable to Harvest Catering in the amount of \$8,000.

Cawthorne and Turner either via cash withdrawal, check negotiation or debit card used a portion of these funds for personal use and not for the SFSP. The government and the defendants agreed that the loss amount caused by the fraud scheme would be determined at sentencing.

In connection with the tax fraud charge, Cawthorne admitted to hiring a tax return preparer to prepare his 2013 tax return and admitted that he assisted in the preparation of his tax return for the 2013 tax year. Cawthorne received income from Harvest Catering that he failed to report, and he fraudulently reported an adjusted gross income of \$7,555 during the 2013 calendar year. Cawthorne knew the statement in his 2013 tax return was false and filed the 2013 tax return on or about April 15, 2014 knowing that it contained false information, in that the amount of his income was higher.

Cawthorne and Turner each face a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, 3 years of supervised release, and a fine of up to \$250,000, on the wire fraud count. In addition, Cawthorne faces up to 3 years in prison, a \$100,000 fine, or both, on the tax fraud count.

Sentencing for Cawthorne and Turner has been set for March 16, 2022 beginning at 9:30 a.m.

The Louisiana Office of the State Inspector General, FBI, IRS-Criminal Investigation, and USDA-OIG investigated the case. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Tennille M. Gilreath and Brandon B. Brown prosecuted the case.

###