

Minden, Louisiana Woman Sentenced for Theft of Government Funds

Jackson, MS – A Minden woman was sentenced on Tuesday, November 23, 2021, to 24 months in the custody of the Bureau of Prisons, followed by 3 years of supervised release, and ordered to pay \$244,060.09 in restitution for embezzling and converting government funds to her own use.

Southern District of Mississippi

U.S. Attorney Darren J. LaMarca of the Southern District of Mississippi, Special Agent in Charge Douglas A. Williams, Jr. of the FBI New Orleans Field Division, Special Agent in Charge Dax Robertson of USDA OIG in New Orleans, and Louisiana Inspector General Stephen Street made the announcement.

According to court documents, Teressia Garner, 60, was the director and registered agent of Safe Haven Development, Inc., a non-profit corporation. Safe Haven entered into an agreement with the Louisiana Department of Education's Division of Nutrition Support to participate in several Child Nutrition Programs, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Nutrition Program. Funding for these programs is federal government money administered by the Food and Nutrition Service, an agency of the United States Department of Agriculture. Safe Haven received federal funding and participated in these programs from 2011 through 2015 by providing meals to those children and adults that are enrolled in participating child care centers, adult day care centers, and day care homes.

Garner used the Child Nutrition Program funds for personal use in the form of donations, gifts, retail store purchases, hotels, and restaurants. For example, on December 15, 2015, Teressia Garner planned a Christmas party for the employees of Safe Haven at the Wyndham Garden Shreveport. The defendant paid for the party, totaling \$9,578.48 with program funds that had been deposited into the Safe Haven business account. The party included the expense of renting a large ballroom, catered food, and an open bar serving alcohol. The program funds used for the party were intended to be used for the Child Nutrition Programs and not for entertainment purposes.

"The greed shown by Garner for self-indulgence at the expense of those for whom this program was intended will not be tolerated in Louisiana, Mississippi, or elsewhere," said U.S. Attorney Darren LaMarca, whose office handled the prosecution. "I thank our partners in Louisiana, both federal and state, for pursuing this investigation to its responsible source."

"Today's sentencing sends a clear message that individuals like Ms. Teressia Garner who brazenly steal from children in need will be held accountable," said FBI New Orleans Special Agent in Charge Douglas A. Williams, Jr. "Ms. Garner, out of personal greed, committed fraud against the USDA Summer Foods Service Program which is designed to provide children in low-income areas nutritious meals during the summer when school is not in session. We thank our partners at the United States Attorney's Office, Southern District of Mississippi, Office of State Inspector General, State of Louisiana, and the Office of Inspector General, United States Department of Agriculture."

USDA OIG Special Agent in Charge Dax Roberson stated: "I want to thank the US Attorney's office, OIG special agents, and our investigative partners for their hard work on this investigation. When the integrity of nutrition programs for needy children is violated by criminal conduct, the Office of Inspector General will pursue justice to the fullest extent of the law."

Louisiana Inspector General Stephen Street commented: "The sentencing of Ms. Garner brings a just conclusion to a sad episode of greed and callous

disregard for the welfare of children. We are committed to working as many of these criminal cases as necessary to make sure the message gets through -- we cannot and will never tolerate it." Street added, "Continued kudos to Assistant United States Attorneys Erin Chalk and Meghan McCalla, the FBI and the USDA OIG."

Garner pleaded guilty to Theft of Government Funds in the United States District Court for the Western District of Louisiana, Shreveport Division on July 9, 2021.

The case was prosecuted by Southern District of Mississippi Assistant United States Attorneys Erin Chalk and Meghan McCalla, Acting Under the Authority Conferred by 28 U.S.C. §515, to appear in the Western District of Louisiana.