

Former Caddo Parish Commissioner and Sister Sentenced to Time in Federal Prison

Western District of Louisiana

SHREVEPORT, La. - United States Attorney Brandon B. Brown announced that **Lynn D. Cawthorne**, 55, a former Caddo Parish Commissioner, and his sister and co-defendant, **Belena C. Turner**, 50, both of Shreveport, Louisiana, were sentenced today by United States District Judge Elizabeth E. Foote for committing wire fraud.

Cawthorne was sentenced to 46 months in prison for committing wire fraud and 36 months in prison for committing tax fraud, both to run concurrently. He will serve 3 years of supervised release following his release from prison. In addition, Cawthorne was ordered to pay \$58,183.95 in restitution to the IRS.

Turner was sentenced to 46 months in prison for committing wire fraud, followed by 3 years of supervised release.

In addition, Cawthorne and Turner were ordered to jointly pay restitution in the amount of \$837,690.01 to USDA.

Cawthorne and Turner each pleaded guilty on November 5, 2021, to wire fraud charges 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.

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.

From 2011 to 2014, Cawthorne and Turner caused their non-profit corporation, United Citizens and Neighborhoods, Inc. (UCAN) to participate in the SFSP. After the discovery of discrepancies by the LDOE, an investigation ensued utilizing multiple agencies. The investigation revealed that Cawthorne and Turner received \$1,015,123.54 in claims paid by the LDOE for the SFSP; however, only \$56,351.53 was actually spent on food during the 2011 through 2014 time period causing an actual loss of \$987,919.72. As part of their sentence, Cawthorne and Turner will be required to pay \$837,690.01 in restitution.

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. In relation to his tax fraud charge, Cawthorne will be required to pay \$58,183.95 in restitution.

"These programs were created to provide meals to children in low-income areas during the summer months," said United States Attorney Brandon B. Brown. "Instead of providing services to the children who needed it most, these defendants took advantage of them and in turn added money to their own pocketbooks. It's a sad day when we cannot put our complete trust in community leaders who have promised to help mankind and those in need, but instead choose to cheat the system in order to benefit themselves. This is not the first instance of this type of fraud involving USDA child nutrition programs in this district in recent years. As in years past, our women and men at the U.S. Attorney's Office will continue to aggressively investigate and prosecute those who commit criminal acts to take advantage of the 'least of these' in our community for personal gain."

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

Louisiana Inspector General Stephen Street commented, "The federal prison sentences imposed today upon Lynn Cawthorne and Belena Turner are entirely appropriate in light of their brazen theft of well over \$800,000 of taxpayer funds intended to feed hungry children. We are hopeful that these significant jail sentences will send the message that such callous disregard for the welfare of children can never be tolerated." Street added, "I want to thank United States Attorney Brandon Brown and his staff for their usual outstanding work, as well as our partners at the FBI, IRS and Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office."

"Honest and law abiding citizens are fed up with the likes of those who use deceit and fraud to line their pockets with other people's money," said Special Agent in Charge James E. Dorsey, IRS Criminal Investigation, Atlanta Field Office. "Cawthorne was positioned to service the community but instead took government funds to satisfy his personal desires. Individuals who engage in financial fraud should know they will not go undetected and will be held accountable."

The Louisiana Office of the State Inspector General, FBI, IRS-Criminal Investigation, USDA-OIG and the Caddo Parish Sheriff's Office investigated the case. U.S. Attorney Brandon B. Brown, First Assistant Alexander C. Van Hook, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Tennille M. Gilreath prosecuted the case.

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