

Minden, Louisiana Woman Pleads Guilty to Theft of Government Funds

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Jackson, MS – Teressia Garner, 60, of Minden, Louisiana, pleaded guilty on July 9, 2021, to embezzling, and converting government funds to her own use, announced Acting U.S. Attorney Darren J. LaMarca; Douglas Williams, FBI Special Agent in Charge, New Orleans Field Division; Dax Robertson, USDA OIG Special Agent in Charge in New Orleans; and Stephen Street, Louisiana Inspector General

According to court documents, Teressia Garner 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.

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.

"Ms. Garner's greed was evident, stealing money designated for the USDA Summer Food Service and Child and Adult Care Food Programs, which provide nutritional meals for children and adults in low-income families, to pay her own personal expenses. Ms. Garner's guilty plea sends a clear message and will be a deterrent to others who would attempt to defraud American taxpayers", said Douglas Williams, FBI New Orleans Special Agent in Charge. "I would like to thank the efforts put forth by 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: "This is just the latest in a series of successful criminal cases where summer nutrition funds were stolen without a shred of regard for the children the funds were supposed to benefit. It is criminal behavior based in pure greed, and we have zero tolerance for it. The Louisiana OIG will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to aggressively pursue criminal consequences for anyone who steals from the public." Street added, "I want to thank Assistant United States Attorneys Erin Chalk and Meghan McCalla for their outstanding work, as well as our partners at the FBI and USDA OIG."

Garner pleaded guilty to Theft of Government Funds in the United States District Court for the Western District of Louisiana, Shreveport Division. She is scheduled to be sentenced by United States District Judge Donald E. Walter on October 13, 2021 at 10:00 a.m. in Shreveport. She faces a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. The District Judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The case is being 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.

