



Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
FRIDAY, JULY 6, 2007
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OCTAVIA CALDWELL PLEADS GUILTY TO CONSPIRACY AND IDENTITY THEFT IN CONNECTION WITH FILING MULTIPLE FRAUDULENT FEMA CLAIMS

(HOUSTON, TX) - Octavia Caldwell, 33, of Houston pled guilty today to conspiring to file false claims and aggravated identity theft in connection with her filing of multiple fraudulent FEMA claims for Hurricane Katrina and Rita relief, United States Attorney Donald J. DeGabrielle, Jr. announced today.

At a hearing this afternoon before United States District Judge Sim Lake, Caldwell pled guilty to two counts of the eleven-count indictment handed down against her and four other individuals. She pled guilty to Count One, which charges her with conspiring to commit the federal offense of filing a false claim with a government agency, mail fraud, and stealing more than \$1,000 from the United States. That offense carries a punishment of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. She also pled guilty to Count Ten, which charges her with using the Social Security number of another person without authority in connection with her commission of a mail fraud scheme. The aggravated identity theft offense carries a mandatory two-year prison sentence which must run consecutive to any sentence imposed on the conspiracy count. Judge Lake scheduled Octavia Caldwell's sentencing for September 17, 2007 at 2:00 p.m. Caldwell will remain free on bond pending sentencing.

Octavia Caldwell came to the attention of federal law enforcement after a General Accounting Office review of Hurricane Katrina and Rita FEMA claims revealed that more than forty claims were filed under different names using the Houston mailing address of Octavia Caldwell. Investigation revealed that the names used in these claims were friends or relatives of Octavia Caldwell's and that all of these people resided in Houston, and not New Orleans or Lake Charles as stated in the claims, during 2005 when Katrina and Rita struck. Indeed, some of the "damaged addresses" in New Orleans and Lake Charles listed in these claims did not even exist. After investigators searched the FEMA database to see if other Houston mailing addresses had been used to file claims using the names listed in the claims that used Octavia Caldwell's residence, they discovered a total of 103 claims filed using names tied to the conspiracy. FEMA mailed checks totaling \$145,438 based on these claims, mostly in the form of the \$2,000 expedited assistance payments which were sent before inspectors visited the listed addresses to verify residency and damage. Thirteen of the claims listed Octavia Caldwell as the first and last names but used different middle initials. Octavia Caldwell used different social security numbers, without the knowledge or authority of the true assignees, in each claim filed using her name. She cashed the checks mailed to her house at grocery stores and check cashing establishments in the Houston area.

With Octavia Caldwell's guilty plea, all defendants named in this conspiracy have been convicted. Three have been sentenced thus far. Curtis Caldwell received a sentence of 24 months in prison, Ernet Tutt received a sentence of 18 months in prison, and Judy Ann

Patterson received a sentence of 6 months in prison. Lester Patterson, Brandy Golatt, and Elizabeth Caldwell are awaiting sentencing.

A total of 49 individuals have been charged in the Southern District of Texas with fraud relating to Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Rita.

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 OIG, Social Security OIG, and the General Accounting Office.. 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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