



Department of Justice

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HURRICANE KATRINA FRAUDSTER TO BE SENTENCED TO 43 YEARS IN A FEDERAL PRISON

MONTGOMERY, ALA.—A Montgomery woman, Bernetta LaShay Willis, 28, was sentenced to the longest sentence yet handed out in the United States for a case arising out of Hurricanes Katrina or Rita, U.S. Attorney Leura G. Canary announced today.

Judge Mark E. Fuller sentenced Willis to serve 516 months (43 years) in federal prison. Previously, Judge Fuller had presided over Willis's four day trial in which a Montgomery jury found her guilty of 22 different counts involving the filing of false claims for Hurricane Katrina disaster assistance, theft of funds intended for victims of Hurricane Katrina, threatening a witness from another Hurricane Katrina case, conspiracy, drug distribution, weapons charges, and lying to federal authorities. According to the Hurricane Katrina Task Force, headquartered in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, this is the longest sentence ever given for a case arising out of Hurricane Katrina or Rita fraud.

Willis's sentence was comprised of 34 years statute mandatory minimum sentences for the threatening of a witness, for the drug and gun charges, and for the aggravated identity theft. The additional nine years related to Willis's theft, conspiracy to defraud FEMA, and drug distribution charges. As related to the Katrina fraud, Judge Fuller additionally found that while Willis was successful in stealing \$80,000 from FEMA, her intent was to steal well over \$500,000 in FEMA funds. When Willis is released, she will be required to repay FEMA the funds she took.

Fuller also enhanced Willis's sentence because of her extensive role as a leader or organizer of the FEMA fraud conspiracy and for her obstruction of the administration of justice.

The United States Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Alabama is a member of the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, created by the Department of Justice in September 2005 to deter, detect, investigate and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes. The Task Force, chaired by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of DOJ's Criminal Division, is comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, and United States Attorneys' Offices from the Gulf Coast region and nationwide.

This matter was investigated by Edward B. Kleppinger, III of the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, with the assistance of James Tynan and David Dirmeyer of the U.S. Postal Inspector Service, VaLaine Jones of Social Security Administration, Office of Inspector General, Trevor Fenwick of the United States Secret Service, and Devin Whittle of the

Drug Enforcement Administration.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Christopher A. Snyder with the assistance of Assistant United States Attorneys Susan Redmond and Andrew O. Schiff. Thus far, the Middle District of Alabama has charged a total of 38 Hurricane Katrina and Rita fraud-related cases involving 44 different defendants.

If anyone has information concerning possible fraud being committed during the post-Katrina recovery effort, please call either the Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General Fraud Hotline at 1-866-720-5721.

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