



PRESS RELEASE

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MONTGOMERY WOMAN INDICTED ON FEMA FRAUD AND THREATS TO A FEDERAL WITNESS CHARGES

A federal grand jury returned an indictment on March 1, 2006, against Bernetta Willis, age 27, a resident of Montgomery county, charging her with fraudulently obtaining disaster assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency ("FEMA") in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and then threatening a witness who was to testify against her about her FEMA claims, U. S. Attorney Leura G. Canary announced today. Willis is also charged with using a gun while threatening the witness.

Canary said, "We continue to actively investigate cases of alleged fraud related to Hurricane Katrina. This office will prosecute to the fullest extent of the law those persons who defraud the United States and who seek to thwart justice."

This is the fifth set of Katrina related fraud cases that have been indicted in this district, but the first to involve a crime of violence. In total, eleven indictments have been returned from various grand juries in the Middle District.

Here, the indictment alleges that Ms. Willis submitted applications for benefits to FEMA claiming that she had suffered damage to property she rented as her primary residence in Louisiana. The indictment further alleges that, in fact, the defendant lived in Montgomery, not Louisiana, and did not suffer the losses claimed. As a result of the false claims she received four benefit checks totaling \$8,716.

The indictment also alleges that Ms. Willis then used physical force and the threat of physical force against a witness to prevent the witness' testimony in an official proceeding. The indictment further charges that Willis used and brandished a gun while threatening the witness.

Ms. Willis is charged with four counts of theft of government property, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 641; one count of threatening a witness, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 1512(a)(2)(A); and one count of using a gun during a crime of violence, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Sections 924(c)(1)(A)(i) and (ii). The theft and threatening of a witness counts each carry a statutory maximum penalty of ten years imprisonment, while the count for using a gun during a crime of violence carries a statutory maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

Willis' arraignment is set for March 15, 2006 at 10:00 a.m., and the trial date will be set at that time.

The case was investigated by the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General. The

case will be prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher A. Snyder.

Members of the public are reminded that the indictment contains only charges. A defendant is presumed innocent of the charges and it will be the government's burden to prove a defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at trial.

