



*United States Attorney
District of New Jersey*

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**THREE SOUTH JERSEY INDIVIDUALS PLEAD GUILTY TO DEFRAUDING FEMA
RELATING TO MAJOR DISASTERS**

CAMDEN, N.J. – Three individuals today admitted to disaster benefits fraud relating to a presidential disaster declaration for the state of New Jersey after the nor'easter in 2010 and Hurricane Irene in 2011, U.S. Attorney Paul J. Fishman announced.

Debbie Hicks, 51, of Atlantic City, N.J., pleaded guilty to a two-count Information charging her with disaster benefits fraud and making false statements to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Dwana Wright, 40, and Ryan Stevens, 38, both of Camden each pleaded guilty to separate Informations charging them with disaster benefits fraud. All three defendants entered their guilty pleas during separate appearances before Senior U.S. District Judge Joseph E. Irenas.

According to documents filed in this case and statements made in court:

Due to FEMA's vast size and the typically large number of victims resulting from a disaster, FEMA has been frequently targeted in disaster fraud schemes by individuals or groups seeking FEMA monetary assistance for benefits to which they were not entitled. These individuals accomplished their schemes by submitting fraudulent applications to FEMA for, among other things, repairs and rental assistance.

Defendant Debbie Hicks

As a result of the nor'easter, Hicks' apartment in Atlantic City was damaged. On or about April 12, 2010, Hicks filed an application with FEMA seeking federal rental assistance under FEMA's Individual Assistance Program, claiming that her apartment in Atlantic City was damaged as a result of the severe storm and was unfit for occupancy.

On April 13, 2010, a FEMA inspector confirmed Hicks' occupancy and the damage to her rental unit, and declared her apartment uninhabitable. Thereafter, FEMA awarded Hicks rental assistance in the amount of \$923 per month. In her application to FEMA, Hicks failed to disclose that her rent was being paid by the Atlantic County Department of Family and Community Development.

During the plea hearing, Hicks admitted that to continue receiving money from FEMA she lied on various forms which were sent to FEMA. Hicks also admitted that she falsely stated

that her rent was not being paid by another source. As a result of the fraud, Hicks received \$15,691 in FEMA emergency rental assistance funds to which she was not entitled.

Hicks further admitted that while she was defrauding FEMA, she also lied to the Housing Authority and Urban Redevelopment Agency of the City of Atlantic City, which administers housing funds on behalf of HUD. Hicks admitted that when she applied for Section 8 housing, she failed to tell the housing authority that she was receiving funds from both FEMA and the Atlantic County Department of Family and Community Development. Hicks also admitted that she lied about her prior criminal record and the fact that she had used other names and Social Security numbers.

The charges to which Hicks pleaded guilty carry a maximum potential penalty of 35 years in prison and a fine of \$500,000. Hicks' sentencing is scheduled for June 14, 2013.

Defendant Dwana Wright

Wright admitted that she applied for FEMA benefits on Sept. 27, 2011. After FEMA awarded her temporary rental assistance, Wright admitted that she submitted fraudulent documents to FEMA to secure continued disaster assistance through FEMA's rental assistance program. As a result of her fraud, Wright received \$15,763 from FEMA's emergency rental assistance funds to which she was not entitled.

Defendant Ryan Stevens

Stevens admitted that he applied for FEMA benefits on Sept. 13, 2011. After FEMA awarded him assistance for property damage and temporary rental assistance, Stevens admitted that he submitted fraudulent documents to FEMA to secure additional disaster assistance through FEMA's rental assistance program. Stevens admitted that he received \$15,487 from FEMA's emergency rental assistance fund to which he was not entitled.

The charges to which Wright and Stevens pleaded guilty carry a maximum potential penalty of 30 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. Wright's sentencing is scheduled for June 21, 2013. Stevens' sentencing is scheduled for June 21, 2013.

U.S. Attorney Fishman credited special agents of the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Gregory Null, and special agents of U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Inspector General, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Joseph W. Clarke for the investigation leading to today's guilty pleas.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason M. Richardson of the U.S. Attorney's Office Criminal Division in Camden.

Defense counsel:

Hicks: Maggie Moy, Esq., Assistant Federal Public Defender, Camden

Wright: Lori Koch, Esq., Assistant Federal Public Defender, Camden

Stevens: Lori Koch, Esq., Assistant Federal Public Defender, Camden