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District of New Jersey

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, March 19, 2018

Camden, New Jersey, Woman Admits Defrauding FEMA after Natural Disasters

CAMDEN, N.J. – A Camden woman today admitted defrauding the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) in 2014 after Hurricane Sandy struck New Jersey in 2012, U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito announced.

Shanyra Bennett 40, pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Jerome B. Simandle in Camden federal court to an information charging her with one count of Disaster Benefits Fraud.

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

When a natural disaster or federal emergency occurs in the United States, federal agencies, such as FEMA, provide relief and assistance to effected individuals and entities. FEMA provides financial assistance by, among other things, helping effected individuals repair their property.

Due to FEMA's vast size and the typically large number of victims resulting from a disaster, FEMA is frequently targeted in disaster fraud schemes by individuals or groups seeking benefits to which they are not entitled. They do this by submitting fraudulent applications to FEMA for among other things, repairs and rental assistance.

In October 2012, various counties of southern New Jersey, including Camden County, sustained significant damage due to wind, rain, and flooding from Hurricane Sandy.

On Oct. 30, 2012, then-President Obama signed a Presidential Disaster Declaration for the State of New Jersey, enabling eligible individuals to seek financial assistance from FEMA when displaced by the storms.

Bennett admitted today that she applied for FEMA benefits in November 2012, requesting rental assistance, assistance to replace personal property that was damaged and assistance for transportation, as her car was damaged and not drivable.

Bennett faxed FEMA documents claiming that she worked as a senior health aide, which required her to travel for work. She sent FEMA a fraudulent letter indicating that she had insurance through Mercury Indemnity Co. of America. At the time of the hurricane, Bennett did not have insurance with Mercury Indemnity. Bennett also submitted fraudulent invoices from a mechanic in Camden.

Based on these false representations and fraudulent documents, on Dec. 10, 2012, FEMA electronically transferred \$5,162 into Bennett's bank account to replace her 2004 Dodge Durango, which she falsely reported destroyed by the hurricane.

To support her claim for personal property assistance, Bennett faxed FEMA a letter purported to be on the letterhead of her employer, which indicated that she was a Certified Home Health Aid and that her position required a laptop to perform her job. She also faxed FEMA earning statements from a company in Camden for July 2013, August 2013, September 2013 and October 2013. At the time of the hurricane, Bennett was unemployed.

As part of the application process for rental assistance, Bennett provided a fraudulent copy of a lease agreement for a house on South 41st Street, Camden, and fraudulent copies of rental receipt payments for June 2013 through November 2013. Bennett neither rented the property nor paid rent for use of the property.

Based on Bennett's false statements and representations, between December 2012 and September 2013, FEMA transferred \$22,190 in disaster related funds through electronic fund transfers into Bennett's bank account.

Bennett admitted that she also defrauded FEMA in 2011, when Hurricane Irene struck the area. She admitted that between September 2011 and November 2012, based on her fraudulent claims and representations, she received approximately \$30,200 in FEMA disaster related funds.

The charge to which Bennett pleaded guilty carries a maximum potential penalty of 30 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. Bennett's sentencing is scheduled for June 27, 2018.

U.S. Attorney Carpenito credited special agents of the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Mark Tasky, with the investigation leading to today's guilty plea.

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

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