



Department of Justice

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DEFENDANT PLEADS GUILTY TO HURRICANE IKE FRAUD

ATLANTA – Angela Pratt Avery pleaded guilty in federal court to fraudulently obtaining FEMA assistance funds intended for the victims of Hurricane Ike.

“These defendants lied by claiming they were victims of Hurricane Ike in 2008 and, based on those lies, stole over \$50,000 in disaster relief funds that were intended for the true victims,” said United States Attorney Sally Quillian Yates. “The Disaster Fraud Task Force was created in 2005 to target those fraudsters who would seek to turn the tragedy of a natural disaster into an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of the American people.”

“I am pleased by today’s guilty plea. DHS-OIG will continue its commitment towards working with this U.S. Attorney's Office and our law enforcement partners to identify and aggressively investigate these egregious violations,” said James Ward, Special Agent in Charge, Office of Investigations, Atlanta, Department of Homeland Security, Office of the Inspector General. “In the future, DHS-OIG will remain vigilant in seeking prosecutions in such cases to uphold the integrity of our Federal Emergency Programs, which are intended for law abiding citizens.”

According to United States Attorney Yates, the charges and other information presented in court: Avery, 45, of Lawrenceville, Ga., and two co-defendants, John A. Wheeler, 57, and Melody Lockett Carter, 49, both of Wilmerding, Pa., worked together to file three fraudulent FEMA claims for Hurricane Ike disaster relief funds. The defendants filed the claims in September 2008 and January 2009, falsely claiming that Avery and Carter lived at a West Ventura Drive address in Galveston, Texas, at the time of Hurricane Ike and that their personal property had been damaged by the storm. In fact, all three defendants lived in Norcross, Ga., at the time of Hurricane Ike and were not victims of the storm. The defendants received over \$50,000 in disaster assistance from FEMA based on their fraud.

On September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike made landfall near Galveston, causing widespread damage along the Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida coastlines and the surrounding areas. After Hurricane Ike struck the Texas coastline, FEMA provided financial disaster assistance to displaced individuals who resided in various counties in Texas. Those individuals could make an application for disaster assistance funds by filing a claim with FEMA that included the Texas address where they were living at the time of the hurricane.

Avery pleaded guilty to one count of theft of government money. On January 10, 2014, Wheeler and Carter each pleaded guilty to one count of theft of government money. Sentencing for the defendants has not yet been scheduled.

This case is being investigated by Special Agents of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General.

Assistant United States Attorney Stephen H. McClain is prosecuting the case.

In September 2005, the Attorney General established the Disaster Fraud Task Force to deter, detect, and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes such as charity fraud, identity theft, procurement fraud, and insurance fraud related to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. As multiple disasters occurred in subsequent years, the Task Force expanded its mandate to all types of disaster fraud. The Task Force, chaired by Acting Assistant Attorney General David O'Neil of the Criminal Division, includes the FBI, the Postal Inspection Service, the U.S. Secret Service, the Federal Trade Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, federal Inspectors General, and various representatives of state and local law enforcement.

For further information please contact the U.S. Attorney's Public Affairs Office at USAGAN.PressEmails@usdoj.gov or (404) 581-6016. The Internet address for the home page for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia Atlanta Division is <http://www.justice.gov/usao/gan/>.

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