

**Department of Justice**  
U.S. Attorney's Office  
District of Montana

---

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Monday, April 5, 2021

## **Jury convicts former chairwoman of Montana Native Women's Coalition of stealing federal grant funds**

BILLINGS — A federal jury on April 2 convicted the former chairwoman of the Montana Native Women's Coalition of crimes related to unapproved spending of federal grant funds, including travel to Las Vegas, Nevada, Acting U.S. Attorney Leif Johnson said.

The jury found Meredith McConnell, 51, of Lame Deer, guilty of theft from a program receiving federal funding, wire fraud and false claims as charged in a superseding indictment. The five-day jury trial began on March 29. McConnell faces a maximum 20 years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and three years of supervised release.

U.S. District Judge Susan P. Watters presided and continued McConnell's release pending further proceedings. A sentencing date is pending.

"Despite receiving training on financial oversight, conflicts of interest and ethics, Meredith McConnell stole grant funds intended to help Native American victims of violence and used the money for unauthorized travel and her own benefit," Acting U.S. Attorney Johnson said. "Our office will hold accountable and prosecute those who misuse grant funds. I want to thank Assistant U.S. Attorneys Ryan Weldon and Bryan Dake and the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General for investigating and prosecuting this case."

"Instead of using grant money to help Native American victims of domestic and sexual violence, McConnell stole those grant funds for her own benefit including to pay for lavish travel and gifts. The Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General will investigate and bring to justice anyone who tries to steal Department of Justice grant funds," said Douglas B. Bruce, Special Agent in Charge of the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General Denver Field Office.

In court documents and in evidence presented at trial, the government alleged that beginning in about August 2017, McConnell, along with others, misappropriated federal grant funds to hand out cash payments to others, to buy purses and earrings as door prizes, to meet in Las Vegas, a trip that cost \$31,744, and to receive double payments for meals. Prosecutors alleged that during a four-month period, McConnell was responsible in the misappropriation of more than 10 percent of grant funds designed to help address violence on Indian reservations in Montana.

The government further alleged the thefts occurred four months after board officials, including McConnell, participated in training about conflicts of interest, whistleblower policies, ethics and financial oversight. The training came after the Coalition's previous executive director pleaded guilty to fraud in March 2017 for stealing from the organization.

The Coalition is a Lame Deer-based organization that helps Native American victims of domestic and sexual violence. The Coalition receives funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), which provides grants for victim services. OVW awarded the Coalition \$318,008 from October 1, 2017 to September 30, 2018.

Co-defendants Sheryl Lynn Lawrence, of Colstrip, who was the Coalition's executive director, and Barbara Mary Daychief, of Browning, who was a Coalition board member, both pleaded guilty to theft of federal funds and are pending sentencing.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Ryan Weldon and Bryan Dake are prosecuting the case, which was investigated by Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General.

XXX