

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Montana Native Women's Coalition ex-director, ex-board treasurer sentenced for stealing grant funds

BILLINGS – Two former officials with the Montana Native Women's Coalition were sentenced to probationary terms and ordered to pay restitution after each admitted to stealing federal grant funds for unapproved spending, including travel to Las Vegas, Nevada, Acting U.S. Attorney Leif M. Johnson said today.

Sheryl Lynn Lawrence, 45, of Colstrip, who was the Coalition's executive director, was sentenced today to three years of probation and ordered to pay \$35,127 restitution jointly and severally with co-defendant Meredith McConnell, the Coalition's former chairwoman. Lawrence pleaded guilty on Feb. 4 to theft of federal funds.

McConnell, 51, of Lame Deer, was convicted on April 2 in a federal jury trial of crimes related to the unauthorized spending of grant funding and is pending sentencing.

Co-defendant Barbara Mary Daychief, 45, of Browning, who was the Coalition's board treasurer, was sentenced on June 17 to two years of probation and ordered to be solely liable for \$2,973 restitution. Daychief pleaded guilty on Jan. 22 to theft of federal funds.

U.S. District Judge Susan P. Watters presided.

"As executive director and board treasurer, Lawrence and Daychief held trusted positions within the Coalition. By stealing the Coalition's federal grant money to spend for their own benefit, Lawrence and Daychief prevented the money from being used as intended -- helping Native American victims of domestic and sexual abuse. Our office will prosecute and hold accountable those who misuse grant funding," Acting U.S. Attorney Johnson said.

"The money that Lawrence and Daychief stole was intended to help Native American victims of domestic and sexual violence. The Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General will continue to root out these schemes, to help ensure that victims of crime are given the help that they need," said Douglas B. Bruce, Special Agent in Charge of the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General Denver Field Office.

In court documents filed in the case, the government said that the purpose of the Lame Deer-based Coalition is to help 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.

The government alleged that while serving as the Coalition's executive director, Lawrence received a travel advance in November 2017. Lawrence claimed \$1,826 in travel money for a trip to Las Vegas. Lawrence claimed she drove, which provided more money due to payment for mileage, when in fact, Lawrence flew, which cost significantly less money. Lawrence spent money on a trip to Las Vegas, which was never approved by the OVW, nor would it ever have been approved.

The government also alleged that while serving on the board, Daychief received travel advances for travel to various locations. In November 2017, Daychief claimed \$1,874 in travel money for a trip to Las Vegas. Although initially intending to travel to the claimed destinations, Daychief ultimately did not travel as planned. Rather than pay back the travel advances as required, Daychief kept the money for herself. When interviewed by law enforcement, Daychief admitted she obtained travel advances despite not traveling as claimed. The government further alleged the thefts occurred four

months after board officials, including Daychief, 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.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Ryan G. Weldon and Bryan T. Dake prosecuted the case, which was investigated by the Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General.

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