

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Former Bureau of Prisons Chaplain Pleads Guilty to Sexual Assault and Lying to Federal Agents

James Theodore Highhouse, 49, a former chaplain with the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) pleaded guilty today in federal court in the Northern District of California to five felonies for sexually abusing a female inmate and subsequently lying to federal agents during their investigation into his misconduct.

According to court documents, from May 15, 2018, through Feb. 9, 2019, Highhouse was employed by the BOP as a corrections worker and chaplain, and was assigned to work at FCI-Dublin, a federal prison that houses female inmates. In his role as a prison chaplain, he led religious services, and offered spiritual guidance to the female inmates. He also taught religious-based classes about boundaries and self-worth, with the understanding that many inmates with whom he interacted came from a background of trauma, abuse, and substance addiction. Highhouse met with these inmates in group settings and one-one-one in his office. At times, Highhouse also performed a custodial role, that is, he could handcuff inmates, write up incident reports and refer inmates for disciplinary action.

During the aforementioned time period, the victim, one of the female inmates housed at FCI-Dublin, came to see Highhouse for spiritual guidance. Highhouse met with her alone in his office on multiple occasions. As part of his guilty plea, Highhouse admitted that during the meetings in his office, he sexually abused the victim. He did so despite receiving training on maintaining boundaries with inmates, and attending yearly BOP refreshers about sexual abuse and prevention.

Then, once the FBI and the Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General (Department of Justice- OIG) opened a federal investigation into his allegations that he sexually abused an inmate, Highhouse lied to federal agents about his misconduct. Specifically, on Feb. 21, 2019, during a voluntary interview with federal agents, he knowingly made false statements when he denied engaging in sexual acts and sexual contact with the victim. Then, during a follow up interview on Feb. 3, 2020, he again misled federal agents, when he again falsely denied engaging in such conduct. Highhouse acknowledged that he repeated those denials even though on Aug. 14, 2019, he handwrote a statement, admitting that he engaged in sexual acts and sexual contact with the victim.

"Any law enforcement official who exploits their authority and position as a spiritual counselor, particularly by sexually abusing an inmate in their custody, must be held accountable for their actions," said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. "The Justice Department will not stand for abuse and misconduct by its own law enforcement officials, and we will take action wherever needed to hold perpetrators accountable under the law."

“The FBI and our Department of Justice-OIG partners take all allegations of sexual misconduct by employees of federal prisons seriously and are committed to swiftly investigating violations under the color of authority at all levels,” said Special Agent in Charge Craig D. Fair of FBI San Francisco.

“Highhouse held a position of great trust as a prison chaplain. He exploited this trust and sexually abused an inmate under his care, and then lied in an effort to cover up his crimes,” said Special Agent in Charge Zachary Shroyer of the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General Los Angeles Field Office. “The Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General will continue to root out this kind of abuse and bring the perpetrators to justice.”

A sentencing date has been set for July 6. Highhouse faces a maximum penalty of up to 39 years in prison.

This case is being investigated by the San Francisco Division of the FBI and the Los Angeles Field Office of the Department of Justice-OIG. The case is being prosecuted by Special Litigation Counsel Fara Gold of the Criminal Section of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department.