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## **Federal Prison Chaplain Sentenced for Sexual Assault and Lying to Federal Agents**

James Theodore Highhouse, 50, a former chaplain with the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) was sentenced today in federal court in the Northern District of California to 84 months in prison followed by five years of supervised release for repeatedly sexually abusing an incarcerated female and then lying to federal agents about his misconduct. Deputy Attorney General Lisa O. Monaco, Department of Justice Inspector General Michael E. Horowitz, Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, FBI Deputy Director Paul Abbate and Special Agent in Charge Sean Ragan of the FBI Sacramento Field Office made the announcement.

Highhouse previously entered a guilty plea to five felonies on Feb. 23, 2022. According to court documents, Highhouse was employed by the BOP as a corrections worker and chaplain starting in 2016, and was assigned to work at Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) Dublin, a federal prison that houses female inmates in Northern California. In his role as a prison chaplain, he led religious services and offered spiritual guidance to incarcerated women. He also taught religious-based classes about boundaries and self-worth, with the understanding that many of the women with whom he interacted came from a background of trauma, abuse and substance addiction. At times, Highhouse also performed a custodial role, that is, he could handcuff inmates, write up incident reports and refer inmates for disciplinary action.

In imposing sentence, the judge considered the defendant's systemic abuse of the victim as well as the accounts of other women whom the defendant subjected to sexual misconduct. The judge specifically noted the defendant's "sustained predatory behavior against traumatized and defenseless women in prison."

"Within our corrections system, chaplains are supposed to provide hope and spiritual guidance," said Deputy Attorney General Monaco. "Instead, this chaplain abused his authority and betrayed the public trust. The Department of Justice will continue to prosecute cases of criminal misconduct by Bureau of Prison employees and hold accountable those who fail to protect those in their custody."

"Today's sentencing sends a clear message to BOP employees that abusing their position of trust will result in serious consequences," said Department of Justice Inspector General Horowitz. "The Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General is committed to rooting out wrongdoing and abuse by BOP employees and bringing perpetrators to justice."

"The Civil Rights Division is thankful that each of these women were willing to come forward and tell federal authorities what happened to them, even after being treated so egregiously by someone who swore a constitutional oath to ensure they were free from sexual assault in

custody,” said Assistant Attorney General Clarke. “As a chaplain, this defendant exploited an additional abuse of trust to facilitate his crimes. This case demonstrates that the Civil Rights Division will not allow such conduct to occur with impunity.”

According to court documents, starting in November 2017, the victim listed in the charging document sought out Highhouse for spiritual guidance and emotional comfort. Highhouse regularly met with her alone in his office. Then from May 2018, until the victim reported him to federal authorities in February 2019, Highhouse sexually abused her, and his conduct escalated in frequency and severity over time. In so doing, as court documents set out, Highhouse used Biblical parables and the victim’s religious beliefs to manipulate her and coerce her into submitting to him. Highhouse did so despite receiving training on maintaining boundaries with inmates and attending yearly BOP refreshers about sexual abuse and prevention.

Highhouse committed sexual abuse in the chapel office, and according to evidence presented at the hearing, to keep the victim from reporting him and avoid detection, he would tell her that no one would believe her because she was an inmate and he was a chaplain.

Once the FBI and the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General (DOJ-OIG) opened a federal investigation into his allegations of his sexual abuse, 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 continued to deny engaging in such conduct.

“Today’s sentencing is possible thanks to the brave women who came forward against their abuser,” said FBI Deputy Director Abbate. “The defendant not only abused his position to commit monstrous crimes against his victims, but also tried to coerce them into silence and lied to federal agents. The FBI will continue to fight for everyone to be free from sexual violence.”

“The FBI is grateful for the courage of all the victims who came forward to report their victimization and help bring James Highhouse to justice,” said Special Agent in Charge Ragan. “The FBI worked tirelessly with DOJ-OIG to investigate this deplorable abuse of power. Civil rights is a top priority for the FBI and allegations of color of law violations will be investigated to the full extent of the law.”

The FBI San Francisco Field Office and the DOJ-OIG Los Angeles Field Office investigated this case. Special Litigation Counsel and Senior Sex Crimes Counsel Fara Gold of the Civil Rights Division’s Criminal Section prosecuted the case.