PRESS RELEASE

Former Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office Employee and Slidell Resident Guilty of Theft and Bribery Conspiracy Concerning Program Receiving Federal Funds

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For Immediate Release
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NEW ORLEANS – U.S. Attorney David I. Courcelle announced that **KENNETH LAWSON (“LAWSON**”), age 39, a resident of New Orleans, and **AREION BANKS (“BANKS”)**, age 33, a resident of Slidell, pled guilty today before United States District Judge Lance M. Africk to conspiracy to commit theft and bribery concerning a program receiving federal funds, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Sections 371, 666(a)(1)(A), and 666(a)(1)(B).

According to court documents, on or about August 10, 2023, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) awarded the Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office (OPSO) a $3.907 million Byrne Discretionary Grant entitled “Technology, Equipment, and Programming Improvements to Support People in Custody and Streamline Reentry” (“DOJ grant”). The purpose of the grant was, in part, to “aid in supporting the health and wellness of people in custody.” Grant funding was available to OPSO until the specified grant performance period end date of April 30, 2025.

LAWSON was employed by the Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office (OPSO) as Grants Manager, in OPSO’s Grants Department, between about August 2022 and November 29, 2024. In that capacity, **LAWSON** possessed the ability to request grant payments from grant originators and to issue checks from OPSO to companies acting as subgrantees under grants received by OPSO.

LAWSON met **BANKS** in about March 2024. Shortly thereafter, **LAWSON** and **BANKS** devised a scheme in which **LAWSON** would exploit his position at OPSO to steal checks made out to subgrantees and convert them to cash. **LAWSON** agreed to accept a portion of the resulting cash in exchange for stealing checks. On one such occasion, on or about August 12, 2024, **BANKS** paid **LAWSON** approximately $5,900 after **LAWSON** successfully diverted approximately $15,000 from OPSO, without authorization, by exploiting **LAWSON's** position with OPSO. In total, **LAWSON** and **BANKS** diverted, and attempted to divert, funds from OPSO in this manner on at least four occasions totaling more than $45,000, and **BANKS** made one payment to **LAWSON**.

Additionally, on about July 30, 2024, **LAWSON** incorporated an entity entitled "Williams James Assoc. LLC." ("Williams James") with the State of Louisiana and thereafter controlled and served as its registered agent and managing member. On the same day, he opened a business checking account at Gulf Coast Bank & Trust Co. ("Gulf Coast") in the name of Williams James. Despite Williams James having no relationship with, or providing services to or on behalf of, OPSO, **LAWSON** in his professional capacity with OPSO, engaged in a digital transaction, requesting that the Department of Justice draw down a portion of the DOJ grant, without authorization, all designed for his personal benefit. Specifically, on or about July 30, 2024, **LAWSON** stole approximately $7,000 from OPSO by causing the deposit of a $7,000 OPSO check into the Williams James account. On or about August 30, 2024, **LAWSON** also caused approximately $75,000 from OPSO to be deposited in the Williams James account.

On or about November 13, 2024, **LAWSON** again attempted to obtain funds, through misappropriation and embezzlement, from the DOJ grant by directing DOJ to send $100,000 of the grant funds to the Williams James account without the knowledge or authorization of his OPSO supervisors. After a bank representative requested that **LAWSON** identify an OPSO representative who could verify that OPSO intended to issue such a significant sum, **LAWSON** and **BANKS** agreed that **BANKS** would contact Gulf Coast and pose falsely as the OPSO employee who had approved the transaction. In exchange for conducting this telephonic ruse, **BANKS** would receive a portion of the ill-gotten proceeds. After **LAWSON** instructed **BANKS** on what to say to Gulf Coast, **BANKS** contacted Gulf Coast, falsely claimed to be the OPSO employee, and told a Gulf Coast representative that OPSO had approved the transaction when, in fact, OPSO was unaware of, and had not approved, the transaction.

LAWSON and **BANKS**, individually, face up to five years in prison, up to a $250,000 fine, up to three years of supervised release, and a $100 mandatory special assessment fee. Sentencing before Judge Africk has been scheduled for May 13, 2026.

U.S. Attorney Courcelle praised the work of the United States Department of Justice – Office of the Inspector General and the Federal Bureau of Investigation in investigating this matter. U.S. Attorney Courcelle also expressed appreciation for the support provided by the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office. Assistant United States Attorney Jordan Ginsberg, Chief of the Public Integrity Unit, is in charge of the prosecution.