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NORTHERN DISTRICT *of* GEORGIA

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U.S. Attorney's Office

Northern District of Georgia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, January 10, 2014

## **Defendants Plead Guilty To Hurricane Ike Fraud**

ATLANTA – John A. Wheeler and Melody Lockett Carter pleaded guilty in federal court to fraudulently obtaining FEMA assistance funds intended for the victims of Hurricane Ike.

“These defendants stole over \$50,000 in disaster relief funds that were intended to benefit those who truly suffered from the devastation of Hurricane Ike in 2008,” said United States Attorney Sally Quillian Yates. “Since the creation of the Disaster Fraud Task Force in 2005, we have remained committed to prosecuting those criminals who would take advantage of natural disasters to enrich themselves.”

James E. Ward, Special Agent in Charge for the U. S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of the Inspector General, said, “The Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General is dedicated to investigating fraud related to DHS programs, specifically FEMA Emergency Disaster Relief Funds. The charges against these defendants serves as an example of our commitment to investigating FEMA fraud allegations and pursuing federal prosecution to the fullest extent of the law. DHS-OIG will continue to place a high priority on investigating these types of crimes which negatively impact FEMA’s Disaster Relief Funds that are intended for law abiding citizens.”

According to United States Attorney Yates, the charges and other information presented in court: Wheeler, 57, and Carter, 49, both of Wilmerding, Pa., and Angela Pratt Avery, 44, of Lawrenceville, Ga., worked together to file three fraudulent FEMA claims for Hurricane Ike disaster relief funds. The defendants filed the claims in September 2008 and January 2009, falsely claiming that Carter and Avery lived at a West Ventura Drive address in Galveston, Texas, at the time of Hurricane Ike and that their personal property had been damaged by the storm. In fact, all three defendants lived in Norcross, Ga., at the time of Hurricane Ike and were not victims of the storm. The defendants received over \$50,000 in disaster assistance from FEMA based on their fraud.

On September 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike made landfall near Galveston, causing widespread damage along the Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida coastlines and the surrounding areas. After Hurricane Ike struck the Texas coastline, FEMA provided financial disaster assistance to displaced individuals who resided in various counties in Texas. Those individuals could make an application for disaster assistance funds by filing a claim with FEMA that included the Texas address where they were living at the time of the hurricane.

Wheeler and Carter each pleaded guilty to one count of theft of government money. Sentencing for Wheeler and Carter will be scheduled at a later date.

This case is being investigated by Special Agents of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General.

Assistant United States Attorney Stephen H. McClain is prosecuting the case.

In September 2005, the Attorney General established the Disaster Fraud Task Force to deter, detect, and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes such as charity fraud, identity theft, procurement fraud, and insurance fraud related to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. As multiple disasters occurred in subsequent years, the Task Force expanded its mandate to all types of disaster fraud. The Task Force, chaired by Acting Assistant Attorney General Mythili Raman of the Criminal Division, includes the FBI, the Postal Inspection Service, the U.S. Secret Service, the Federal Trade Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, federal Inspectors General, and various representatives of state and local law enforcement.

For further information please contact the U.S. Attorney's Public Affairs Office at [USAGAN.PressEmails@usdoj.gov](mailto:USAGAN.PressEmails@usdoj.gov) or (404) 581-6016. The Internet address for the home page for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia Atlanta Division is <http://www.justice.gov/usao/gan/>.

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Updated April 8, 2015