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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Eastern District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Former DEA Official Pleads Guilty to Elaborate \$4M Fraud Scheme

Former spokesman (2005-2009) scammed victims by posing falsely as covert CIA Officer involved in a highly-classified intelligence program

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – A former Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) public affairs officer pleaded guilty today to defrauding at least a dozen companies of over \$4.4 million by posing falsely as a covert officer of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

According to court documents, Garrison Kenneth Courtney, 44, of Florida, falsely claimed to be a covert officer of the CIA involved in a highly-classified program or “task force” involving various components of the United States Intelligence Community and the Department of Defense. According to the false story told by Courtney, this supposed classified program sought to enhance the intelligence gathering capabilities of the United States government. In truth, Courtney had never been employed by the CIA, and the task force that he described did not exist.

To accomplish the fraud, Courtney approached numerous private companies with some variation of this false story, and claimed that the companies needed to hire and pay him to create what Courtney described as “commercial cover,” i.e., to mask his supposed affiliation with the CIA. Courtney also fraudulently claimed that the companies would be reimbursed in the future for these salary payments, sometimes by the award of lucrative contracts from the United States government in connection with the supposedly classified program.

Courtney went to extraordinary lengths to perpetuate the illusion that he was a deep-cover operative. Among other things, he falsely claimed that his identity and large portions of his conduct were classified; directed victims and witnesses to sign fake nondisclosure agreements that purported to be from the United States government and that forbade anyone involved from speaking openly about the supposedly classified program; told victims and witnesses that they

were under surveillance by hostile foreign intelligence services; made a show of searching people for electronic devices as part of his supposed counterintelligence methods; demanded that his victims meet in sensitive compartmented information facilities (SCIFs) to create the illusion that they were participating in a classified intelligence operation; and repeatedly threatened anyone who questioned his legitimacy with revocation of their security clearance and criminal prosecution if they “leaked” or continued to look into the supposedly classified information. Courtney further created fake letters, purporting to have been issued by the Attorney General of the United States, which claimed to grant blanket immunity to those who participated in the supposedly classified program.

As a further part of the scheme, Courtney created a fraudulent backstory about himself, claiming that he had served in the U.S. Army during the Gulf War, had hundreds of confirmed kills while in combat, sustained lung injuries from smoke caused by fires set to Iraq’s oil fields, and that a hostile foreign intelligence service had attempted to assassinate him by poisoning him with ricin. All of these claims were false.

Courtney also convinced several real governmental officials that he was participating in this “task force,” explained that they had been selected to participate in the program, and then used those officials as unwitting props falsely to burnish his legitimacy. For example, he directed his victims to speak with these public officials to verify his claims, and separately instructed the government officials as to exactly what to say. Courtney thereby created the false appearance to the victims that the government officials had independently validated his story, when in fact the officials merely were echoing the false information fed to them by Courtney. At times, Courtney also convinced those officials to meet with victims inside secure government facilities, thereby furthering the false appearance of authenticity.

Through the scheme, Courtney also fraudulently gained a position working as a private contractor for the National Institutes of Health Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center (NITAAC), a branch of NIH that provides acquisition support services to federal agencies. Once he had installed himself at NITAAC, Courtney gained access to sensitive, nonpublic information about the procurements of other federal agencies being supported by NITAAC. Courtney thereafter used that information to attempt to corrupt the procurement process by steering the award of contracts to companies where he was then also on the payroll, and used the false pretext of national security concerns to warp the process by preventing full and open competition.

Courtney pleaded guilty to wire fraud and faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison when sentenced on October 23. Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after taking into account the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

G. Zachary Terwilliger, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia; Brian A. Benczkowski, Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division; and James A. Dawson, Special Agent in Charge, Criminal Division, FBI Washington Field Office, made the announcement after Senior U.S. District Judge Liam O’Grady accepted the plea. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Matthew Burke, Heidi Boutros Gesch, and Raj Parekh, and Todd Gee, Deputy Chief of the Department of Justice’s Public Integrity Section, are prosecuting the case.

Investigative agency partners include CIA OIG; Intelligence Community OIG; National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency OIG; Air Force Office of Special Investigations; U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command's Major Procurement Fraud Unit (MPFU); Defense Criminal Investigative Service's (DCIS) Mid-Atlantic Field Office; Department of Justice OIG; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) OIG; and Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) Washington Field Office.

A copy of this press release is located on the website of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia. Related court documents and information are located on the website of the District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia or on PACER by searching for Case No. 1:20-cr-84.

Attachment(s):

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Topic(s):

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