

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
District of Montana

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Montana Native Women's Coalition Board ex-chairwoman charged with fraud in embezzlement of grant money

BILLINGS—The former chairwoman of the Montana Native Women's Coalition was arraigned today on charges in a 10-count indictment accusing her, and the Coalition's ex-treasurer, of stealing federal grant funds to make unapproved trips to Las Vegas and to receive other unauthorized benefits, U.S. Attorney Kurt Alme said.

Meredith McConnell, 50, of Busby, pleaded not guilty to seven counts charging her with theft from a program receiving federal funding, wire fraud, fraudulent travel claims and misprision of felony. McConnell was the Coalition's chairwoman and the executive director of Healing Hearts.

Co-defendant Barbara Mary Daychief, 43, of Browning, the Coalition's former treasurer, pleaded not guilty on Aug. 13 to six counts.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Timothy J. Cavan presided and released McConnell pending further proceedings.

If convicted of the most serious crime, McConnell faces a maximum 20 years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and three years of supervised release.

The indictment is merely an accusation and the defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

The indictment accuses McConnell and Daychief of stealing from Lame Deer-based coalition from about August 2017 until March 2018. The Coalition's purpose is to help Native American victims of domestic and sexual violence. In addition, the Coalition brings together Native American leaders and state representatives who administer state and federal funds for domestic violence and programming to improve resources for Native women and tribal programs.

The Coalition receives funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, which provides grants for victim services. From October 2017 to September 2018, the OVW awarded the Coalition \$318,008 in federal funds.

In March 2017, the Coalition's previous executive director, Toni Louise Plummer-Alvernaz, pleaded guilty to fraud for stealing from the Coalition. Plummer-Alvernaz was sentenced to one year and one day in federal prison and ordered to pay \$246,024 restitution.

Two months later, the First Nations Development Institute held a two-day training for the Coalition in Billings, where it taught board members, including McConnell and Daychief, about conflicts of interest, whistleblower policies, code of ethics and financial oversight. The Coalition also received a special condition about reporting fraud in its September 2017 award package.

The indictment alleges McConnell and Daychief committed travel fraud, received travel payments on non-approved trips, including to Las Vegas, received and authorized double-payment for "days in service," authorized unapproved construction projects and took other benefits they were not entitled to receive.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Ryan Weldon and Bryan Dake are prosecuting the case, which was investigated by the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General.

Pacer case reference. 19-90. The case may be monitored through the U.S. District Court calendar and the PACER system. To establish a PACER account, please go to, <http://www.pacer.gov/register.html>. To access the district court's calendar, please go to <https://ecf.mtd.uscourts.gov/cgi-bin/PublicCalendar.pl>.

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