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Southern District of Illinois

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U.S. SETTLES DISPUTE WITH EAST ST. LOUIS SCHOOL DISTRICT 189 OVER ITS AMERICORPS PROGRAM

East St. Louis, Ill. – East St. Louis School District 189 (ESL189) has paid the United States \$38,510 to resolve a civil False Claims Act investigation into the operation of its AmeriCorps program, U.S. Attorney Steven D. Weinhoeft announced today.

AmeriCorps is a federally funded network of national service programs that address critical community needs like increasing academic achievement, mentoring youth, fighting poverty, sustaining national parks, preparing for disasters, and more. AmeriCorps volunteers (called members) commit to service for a period of three months to a year in exchange for a living allowance, education awards, and other benefits.

To receive an AmeriCorps education award, each volunteer has to complete a specified number of service hours, among other requirements. Grant recipients like ESL189 are responsible for verifying and certifying those hours to the Corporation for National and Community Service, now known as AmeriCorps, which administers the federal grant program.

From 2016 to 2018, ESL189 received over \$1 million in federal funding and education awards for its AmeriCorps program. During that time, the United States claims that ESL189 falsely certified to AmeriCorps that some of its members had performed the service hours necessary to qualify for an education award, when in fact they had not.

Specifically, the United States contends that certain individuals on staff at ESL189's AmeriCorps program directed members to falsely inflate their timesheets with "bonus hours" to help them qualify for education awards they otherwise wouldn't have earned. For example, on one occasion, ESL189 staff instructed members to report 20 service hours on their timesheets just for completing a 15-minute webinar. On another day, members were told that submitting an updated résumé would count for 25 service hours. Members also received bonus hours for attending events, for showing up on time, and in at least one instance for wearing orange.

"Encouraging AmeriCorps members to falsify their timesheets robbed the students of East St. Louis of academic help they were entitled to receive," said AmeriCorps Inspector General Deborah Jeffrey. "We and our partners at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Illinois will vigorously pursue any such frauds."

“Instructing young volunteers to lie on their timesheets was a terrible decision,” U.S. Attorney Steven D. Weinhoef said. “This settlement shines a light on that misconduct and should serve as an example to other federal grantees in Southern Illinois. In these cases, it isn’t about the money. It’s about ensuring the integrity of the program and, most importantly, making sure the community actually receives these service hours.”

The claims resolved by the settlement are allegations only; no charges were filed in court, and there has been no determination of liability. ESL189 cooperated in the investigation, which began with an anonymous tip in April 2018. The individuals responsible for the fraud are no longer employed by the school district.

The investigation was conducted by the AmeriCorps Office of Inspector General. Assistant U.S. Attorney Nathan D. Stump handled the matter for the United States.

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