

# Former Executive Director of Tribal non-profit sentenced for embezzling federal funds

Friday, May 31, 2024

## For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Washington

## Repeatedly used organization debit card for personal purchases such as electronics, pool, home improvements and more

Tacoma – The former Executive Director of the Western Washington Indian Employment Training Program (WWIETP) was sentenced yesterday in U.S. District Court in Tacoma to five months in custody for embezzling from a program receiving federal funds, announced U.S. Attorney Tessa M. Gorman. Debbie Rawle, 69, formerly of Tacoma, served as Executive Director of the tribally owned non-profit job training program for several years until October 2019. The non-profit is now defunct and no longer receiving any federal funds. At the sentencing hearing, Chief U.S. District Judge David G. Estudillo said that a custodial sentence was appropriate given the seriousness of the offense, which hurt so many who were looking for assistance from the program.

“As the Chairman of the Squaxin Island Tribe noted for the court, this non-profit was supposed to provide services to twenty-one member tribes, whose members “are among those in the greatest need,” said U.S. Attorney Gorman. “While eligible tribal members’ needs went unmet, Ms. Rawle spent lavishly on herself – installing an above ground pool, buying electronics and accessories for motorcycles.”

According to records in the case, the job training non-profit received \$698,153 in 2018 and \$703,388 in 2019 to provide employment and training services for eligible tribal members. The U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Division of Indian and Native American Programs administers the funds.

In September 2019, the Division of Indian and Native American Programs began investigating questionable expenditures using the debit card of the non-profit training organization at a Macy's store. Rawle provided false and misleading information about the purchases, claiming they were work related. In fact, there were multiple purchases of items for Rawle's own use including a new mattress, sunglasses, and clothing.

Further investigation revealed Rawle used the organization debit card for purchases at Best Buy, Amazon, and Costco. At Costco she purchased a cedar pavilion and above ground swimming pool, while on Amazon she ordered a pool maintenance kit, and motorcycle accessories costing more than \$1,000. In all, the embezzled funds amount to \$99,990, which Rawle has agreed to pay in restitution.

Vicki Kruger, a Squaxin Island tribal elder and former WWIETP board member, spoke at the sentencing hearing about the substantial harm caused by Rawle's mismanagement and theft of Program funds, money that would have been used by tribal members to better their lives. According to Kruger, Rawle destroyed the program and harmed the well-being of tribal members for generations to come.

"Debbie Rawle embezzled federal grant funds that were intended to provide education, job training, and employment services to Native Americans in western Washington under the Western Washington Indian Employment and Training Program (WWIETP). As the former executive director of the program, Rawle violated the trust of those she served by personally enriching herself with those funds. We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to aggressively identify those who misuse U.S. Department of Labor grant funds and bring them to justice," said Quentin Heiden, Special Agent-in-Charge, Western Region, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General.

The case was investigated by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Division of Indian and Native American Programs ("DINAP"), the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG) and the FBI.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney J. Tate London. Mr. London serves as a Tribal Liaison for the U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Washington.

## **Contact**

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