

Venice Man Admits to Arson for Hire of St. Louis Apartment, Conspiring to Burn Additional Illinois Properties for Insurance Money

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EAST ST. LOUIS – A Venice man admitted guilt in federal court on Thursday, Jan. 11, 2024, for his involvement in a scheme to commit arson on residential properties and collect fraudulent insurance benefits. Rufis A. Jefferson, 47, pleaded guilty to 14 federal felony charges: one count of conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud, two counts of mail fraud, 10 counts of wire fraud, and one count of conspiracy to commit arson.

U.S. Attorney Rachelle Aud Crowe said the following: “Under federal law, intentionally igniting residential buildings to file insurance claims for the damages and collect benefits is committing fraud, and law enforcement is working to prosecute offenders of these hazardous crimes.”

According to court documents, Jefferson admitted to being paid off by a family member to burn her St. Louis apartment on December 31, 2022, so that she could collect insurance money. In addition to the New Year's Eve fire at Spanish Lake Apartments, Jefferson admitted to conspiring with this relative to burn two additional buildings in Granite City and Venice.

An ATF confidential informant recorded many of the planning conversations and these Illinois buildings were not burned. The relative's insurer is estimated to have paid out more than \$30,000 for the St. Louis apartment fire.

Granite City Woman Is Charged In Indictment

Evette B. Osuegbu, 61, of Granite City, is also charged in the indictment and facing accusations for committing the same 14 federal crimes. An indictment is a formal charge against a defendant. Under the law, a defendant is presumed to be innocent of a charge until proved guilty beyond a reasonable doubt to the satisfaction of a jury. “Arson is a dangerous act of violence,” said Special Agent in Charge Bernard Hansen, Kansas City Field Division, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives (ATF). “Arson poses a great threat to public safety. ATF works diligently to secure public safety. This guilty plea will send a message to anyone who considers conducting these types of violent acts that they will not be tolerated. ATF will continue to work alongside our law enforcement partners to ensure that your community remains a safe place.”

Jefferson's sentencing hearing is scheduled for April 25, 2024. His charges are punishable by up to 20 years' imprisonment per count. ATF led the investigation, and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Kevin Burke and Zoe Gross are prosecuting the case.