

Politician Pamela Harris Indicted for Fraud



Summary: Brooklyn assemblywoman Pamela Harris was indicted for fraud in relation to the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

Hurricane Sandy left a lot of people devastated, including Assemblywoman Pamela Harris' Coney Island neighbors. Instead of helping her neighbors, Harris decided to take advantage of the situation and cash in on the federal funds made available to help people rebuild their homes and lives. She was indicted Tuesday of obstruction of justice, fraud, and other charges.

Harris, 57, is accused of lying about the damage to her Brooklyn home in order to make money off the natural disaster. She ended up pocketing tens of thousands of dollars in federal and state funds through several schemes. Harris then tried to hide what she had done, according to the federal indictment.

Officials claim she spent \$10,000 of her stolen money for vacation getaways for her and her husband on things such as airfare and cruise accommodations. She also allegedly used some of the money to pay her bill at Victoria's Secret for lingerie. She was stealing the money from 2012 through 2017.

While Harris was enjoying her extra cash for luxury items, her constituents were struggling. FBI New York field office head William Sweeney Jr. said, "Harris was busy brewing a storm of her own – one that resulted in her receiving significant payouts by the very federal agency charged with helping those truly in need."

The 21-page indictment states that the Brooklyn politician stole a total of \$23,000 in 2015 from the City Council by claiming the funds would cover the rent for a Brooklyn nonprofit. This was not true. Instead, she deposited the money into her checking account to pay for personal expenses. This happened again in 2016 when the council awarded \$35,000 to Harris to be used for the nonprofit.

Harris also allegedly stole roughly \$25,000 from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) by claiming her Coney Island residence was damaged by the hurricane in 2012. She was living in the undamaged house during the time she was submitting fake rent payment receipts and a phony lease agreement for a Staten Island residence. She was compensated for temporary housing assistance even though she was still living at her Coney Island home.

The authorities arrested Harris Tuesday morning. She is expected to make a federal court appearance for her arraignment later today. She was also charged with attempting to illegally collect funds for Sandy victims as part of the Build It Back program.

Last year when Harris learned she was being investigated, she asked her friends to lie to the FBI agents. U.S. Attorney Richard Donoghue said, "When she learned that law enforcement was investigating her various fraud schemes, she pressured witnesses to lie to the FBI and cover them up."

If convicted, Harris faces up to 30 years in prison. She was charged with 11 counts, including wire fraud, conspiracy to commit wire fraud, bankruptcy fraud, making false statements, witness tampering and conspiracy to obstruct justice.

Harris was elected to the assembly during a November 2015 special election. Her predecessor, Alec Brook-Krasny, was indicted last year in relation to a crackdown of three pill mills accused of placing \$6.3 million in opioids on the black market.

Michael Whyland, spokesman for Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, said, "We are just hearing of this. They are very serious charges and it's important to let the justice system to take its course."

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