



Riverside County District Attorney

CRIMINAL CASE UPDATE

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For Immediate Release
February 11, 2014

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FORMER OWNER/CEO OF FOSTER FAMILY AGENCY PLEADS GUILTY TO EMBEZZLEMENT

RIVERSIDE – Today, Feb. 11, 2014, the former owner/chief executive officer of a Riverside foster family agency, Family Hope Foster Family Agency, entered guilty pleas to two counts of embezzlement by a public officer and was sentenced to three years, four months in state prison.

Vivian Lieska Benn, DOB: 8-10-73, of Temecula, entered into a plea agreement with the Riverside County District Attorney's Office and entered the guilty pleas before Judge Helios Hernandez at the Hall of Justice in Riverside. Benn also admitted to a sentencing enhancement of committing multiple felonies in the taking of more than \$100,000 and less than \$500,000. One of the counts to which she pled guilty pertains to embezzlement that happened from 2004-2009 and the second count to crimes which happened from 2010-2012. Two other counts were dismissed pursuant to the plea agreement. Had she been convicted on all counts, Benn could have faced up to five years in state prison.

As part of the plea, both sides agreed to a restitution amount of \$450,000. Benn has the option of requesting a restitution hearing at a later date.

Foster family agencies (FFA) are licensed by the California Department of Social Services and are required to be non-profit organizations. Foster family agencies are used to hire, license and oversee foster parents for the placement of foster children. Funding for foster care children comes from local, state and federal funds. In Riverside County, the foster care program is administered by the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS).

In May 2009, the Riverside County Auditor-Controller's Office conducted audits of DPSS, specifically of several foster family group homes and FFAs -- including Family Hope FFA. The audit determined that about \$1.2 million of payments made to Family Hope FFA by the county DPSS was unaccounted for. That led to an investigation started in June 2012 by the Riverside County DA's Office into Family Hope FFA. The DA's investigation found that, from 2004-2009 Family Hope FFA received millions of dollars of public money from DPSS intended for the care of foster children. Since the charges were initially filed in July 2013, the continuing investigation found further embezzlement by Benn that happened from 2010-2012.

In 2010, the DA's Office charged the owners of T-Town Group Homes, another foster care agency, with numerous felonies including conspiracy, embezzlement and grand theft. In that case, Purcell and Lavern Johnson pleaded guilty and were sentenced to state prison and ordered to pay more than \$1.2 million in restitution to DPSS.

Benn's case, RIF1302714, was prosecuted by Deputy District Attorney William Robinson of the DA's Professional Standards Unit.