



U.S. Department of Justice

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Cleveland, ND, Woman Pleads Guilty to Visa and Mail Fraud

FARGO – United States Attorney Drew H. Wrigley, District of North Dakota, announced that on November 14, 2019, Catherina Knecht, a/k/a Catherina Rheeder, age 43, formerly from Cleveland, ND, now residing in Williston, ND, pleaded guilty before Chief Judge Peter D. Welte, U.S. District Court, Fargo, ND, to an Indictment charging her with False Statement, False Swearing in an Immigration Matter, and Mail Fraud.

Knecht ran a business, Liberty Immigration & Visas, from her home in Cleveland, ND. Liberty Immigration aided employers seeking to obtain temporary workers under the H-2A (temporary agricultural) and H-2B (temporary nonagricultural) visa programs. An investigation by the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division uncovered evidence of Knecht engaging in visa fraud. The Document Benefits Fraud Task Force in Minneapolis, MN, conducted a criminal investigation. They found evidence of fraud throughout Knecht's visa work. This fraud included fraudulently securing H-2A status for foreign workers under the approved H-2A petitions of certain employers without the knowledge of those employers. Knecht then placed those H-2A workers with a different employer who was not authorized to employ H-2A workers. In the course of doing so, Knecht made materially false statements in both applications to Department of Labor (DOL) and in petitions to US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). Knecht committed mail fraud by submitting those applications via the mail. Knecht also placed foreign workers without authorization to work in the United States with employers and

required the employers to pay her directly, telling those employers the workers' visa paperwork was in progress.

Sentencing is scheduled for February 12, 2020, at 9:00 a.m., before Chief Judge Peter D. Welte.

“Securing the borders through immigration enforcement is a top priority for our Administration, and document fraud is the crime that too often helps keep people in the country illegally, so we will remain committed to prosecuting those whom attempt to dangerously erode our immigration and visa laws,” said United States Attorney Drew Wrigley.

“Homeland Security Investigations remains committed to working in collaboration with our law enforcement partners to identify and dismantle criminal schemes designed to exploit our nation's legal immigration system and interfere with legitimate businesses,” said Tracy J. Cormier, Special Agent in Charge, HSI, St. Paul, MN. “HSI's mission to bring these criminals to justice is instrumental to protecting the public and keeping these government programs intact.”

“Catherina Knecht misused the H-2A program in order to enrich herself at the expense of foreign workers and American employers. The U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General will continue to work with the Department's Wage and Hour Division and our law enforcement partners to vigorously pursue those who commit fraud involving foreign labor certification programs,” said Irene Lindow, Special Agent-in-Charge, Chicago Region, U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General.

“Today's guilty plea sends a strong message: The Diplomatic Security Service is committed to working with the U.S. Department of Justice, and our local law enforcement partners to investigate and prosecute all allegations of criminal activity related to passport and visa fraud,” said Patrick S. Mills, Special Agent in Charge of the DSS Chicago Field Office. “The strong relationship we enjoy with our federal and local law enforcement partners is vital towards ensuring the integrity of U.S. travel documents and protecting greater U.S. interests.”

This case was investigated by the Document Benefits Fraud Task Force (DBFTF). The Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of Labor, and Department of State created the "Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force" to combat document and immigration benefits fraud. The DBFTF is comprised of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies that target criminal organizations and beneficiaries behind fraudulent schemes. Agencies involved were the U.S. Department of State - Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General, Department of Homeland Security - Homeland Security Investigations Document Benefit Fraud Task Force, United States Citizenship and Immigration Service, and U.S. Department of Labor - Wage and Hour Division.

This case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Megan A. Healy.

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