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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Northern District of Illinois

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, October 12, 2017

Head of Amtrak Transportation at Union Station in Chicago Guilty of Corruption for Steering Work to Wife's Company

CHICAGO — The head of Amtrak transportation at Union Station in Chicago admitted in federal court today that he steered work to his wife's company to photograph Amtrak's "Polar Express" train event last holiday season.

BENJAMIN SHEETS, an Amtrak employee and superintendent of transportation at Union Station, admitted in a plea agreement that he steered work to his wife's suburban photography company to photograph train riders and families at Amtrak's "Polar Express" event. Sheets also worked for his wife's company as the business manager – a fact he failed to disclose to Amtrak. When Sheets learned that Amtrak's Office of Inspector General was investigating the contract, he created false records and made false statements to the Inspector General's investigators.

Sheets, 50, of Downers Grove, pleaded guilty to making false statements to Amtrak's Office of Inspector General. U.S. District Judge Charles P. Kocoras set sentencing for Feb. 27, 2018, at 9:45 a.m.

The guilty plea was announced by Joel R. Levin, Acting United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois; and Thomas Howard, Inspector General of Amtrak.

"The American people deserve fair and honest services from those entrusted to manage aspects of our nation's passenger rail service," said Inspector General Howard. "Amtrak personnel who make false statements in an effort to achieve personal gain will be held accountable. Our office will vigorously investigate and help bring to justice those who engage in such criminal activity as we work to protect Amtrak funds, American taxpayers, and the traveling public."

Amtrak's "Polar Express" event is a family-oriented holiday celebration that includes festively decorated trains departing Union Station on a daily basis in December, with actors re-enacting the train ride from the 2004 "Polar Express" film starring Tom Hanks.

On Nov. 2, 2016, Sheets received an email from his wife that listed debts in excess of \$25,000, prompting

Sheets to respond, "We need to write an agreement for Polar Express," according to a criminal information previously filed in the case. Soon thereafter, Sheets steered the work for Polar Express photography to his wife's Downers Grove-based company, without following Amtrak procurement procedures. During the "Polar Express" event in December 2016, the wife's company set up a photo booth in Union Station's Great Hall and sold 3,679 photos for \$10 each.

When Sheets learned in early 2017 that Amtrak Inspector General investigators were looking into the award of work, Sheets had the promotions company that staged the event prepare a back-dated, phony contract to make it appear that the wife's photography business had been hired by the promotions company prior to the commencement of the Polar Express event. Sheets tendered the contract to Inspector General investigators in March 2017, even though he knew it was phony.

Making false statements is punishable by up to five years in prison. The Court must impose a reasonable sentence under federal statutes and the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Terry M. Kinney.

Attachment(s):
[Download Plea Agreement](#)

Component(s):
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Topic(s):
Public Corruption

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