The Virgin Islands Consortium

# St. Croix Woman Gets Two Years in Federal Prison For Role in Tax Scheme to Defraud Federal Government

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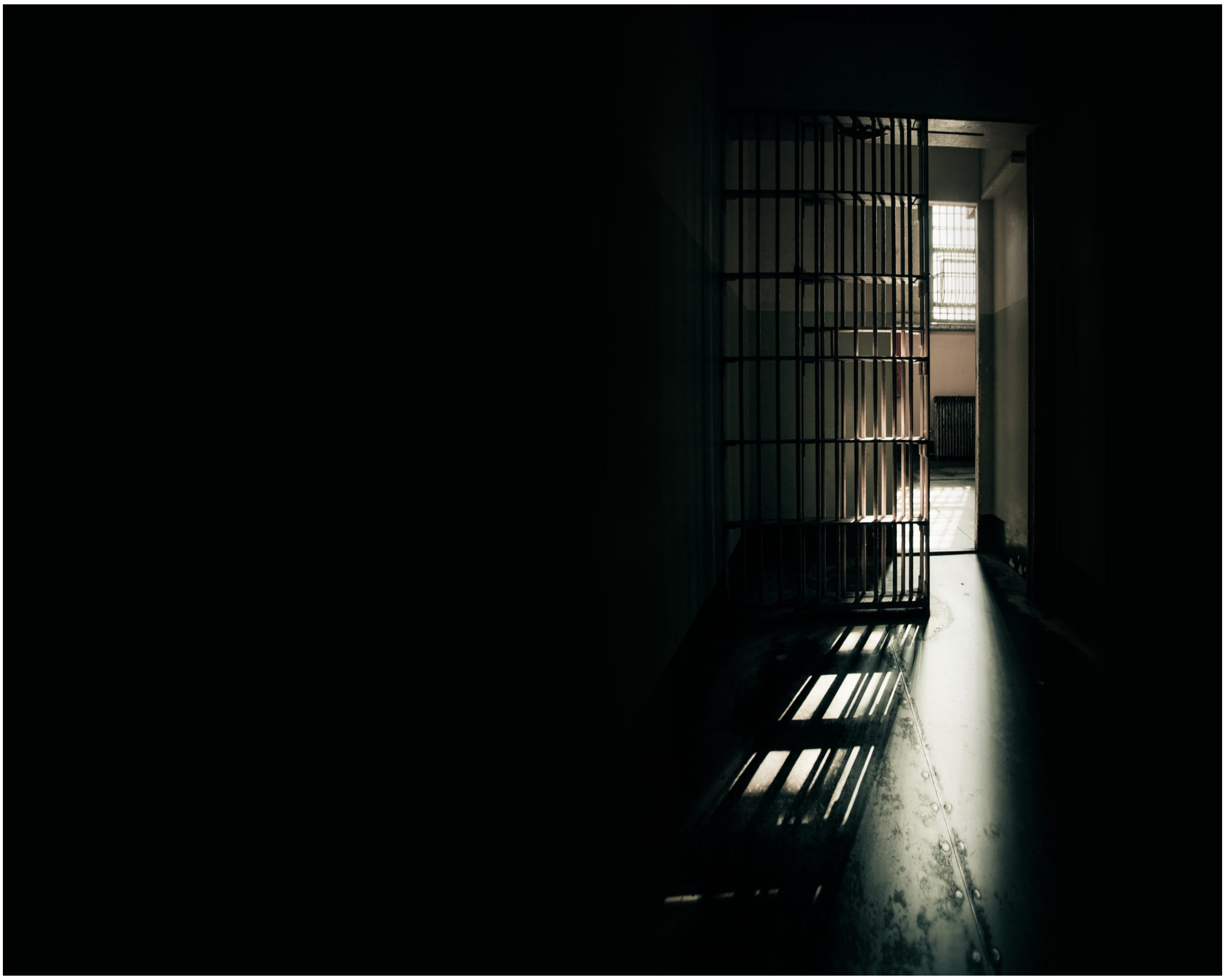

ST. CROIX — United States Attorney Gretchen C.F. Shappert announced today that Joanne Benjamin, age 41, from St. Croix was sentenced on August 26 in federal court by Judge Wilma A. Lewis to twenty-four months incarceration followed by three years of supervised release for her part in a multi-defendant tax fraud scheme. She pleaded guilty on March 11 to conspiracy to defraud the United States.

According to the plea agreement filed with the court, from January 2011 to July 2012, Benjamin and others participated in a scheme to steal money from the United States treasury by fraudulently obtaining federal income tax refunds. The scheme involved the acquisition of personal identifying information of individuals (i.e. name, social security number, and date of birth) used to electronically file falsified tax returns with a designation of refunds to the acquired bank accounts or debit cards. Defendant and her co-conspirators withdrew the deposited refunds, spent them using a debit card, or transferred them to other accounts, all for personal use.

As a result of the scheme, approximately $110,896 of falsely claimed returns was designated for deposit into Defendant’s bank account, of which approximately $80,424.83 was actually deposited therein. The Court also ordered Benjamin to pay restitution of $80,424.83 to the Internal Revenue Service, and her $1000 posted bail bond will be applied toward restitution and a $100 special assessment fee, upon motion of the United States.

Of ten defendants charged in the tax fraud scheme, Benjamin is one of nine to plead guilty. The tenth defendant, Jacinta Gussie, was found guilty in June of 2021 after a six-day trial of Conspiracy to Defraud the United States, four counts of Theft of Government Money, and two counts of Aggravated Identity Theft. Gussie’s sentencing date is pending.

The prosecution of this fraud scheme is the result of years of investigative work by the Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigations, which identified and dismantled a massive stolen identity refund fraud scheme perpetrated in the Virgin Islands and elsewhere.

The case was investigated by the Internal Revenue Service, Criminal Investigations, and is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Melissa Ortiz.