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Former UC Davis employee charged with embezzlement

Whistleblower tips off investigators to alleged program pilferer

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A former UC Davis employee was charged with theft of government property last month after the preliminary results of an investigation by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Beverly Benford, 65, is alleged to have embezzled funds from where she worked, the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program. FSNEP is a smaller part of the overall Food Stamp Program, which works to provide food to low-income individuals. The Food Stamp Program is overseen by the USDA, which means the funds allegedly misappropriated by Benford were federal, and as such were government property. The overall budget for FSNEP is approximately \$13.3 million, about half of which is considered federal money. United States Attorney McGregor Scott estimated that the total financial loss could reach as high as \$160,000.

According to a study done by the USDA, the Food Stamp Program assisted approximately 26 million people in 2006 alone, providing almost \$100 per person to aid in food purchases.

The investigation resulted from a whistleblower complaint filed by UC Davis Director of FSNEP Amy Block Joy. The complaint alleges that Benford, with her authority within the department, had been making falsified purchases since July 2000. Items bought by Benford include a home stereo system, a camcorder, DVD players, iPods, computers, TVs and PDAs. It has been theorized that some of the equipment is currently in use by departments outside FSNEP, which would also be a misuse of funds, according to a Yolo County legal document concerning the case.

Though Benford has not been convicted, some UC Davis students said they are not happy with her actions.

"I don't understand how someone could do that," said Cindy Banh, a first-year undeclared life sciences major. "Especially when there are so many needy people out there. I think a just punishment would be for her to perform community service for six months, perhaps volunteering at a soup kitchen and taking

a course in ethics."

The maximum penalty Benford currently faces is 10 years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and three years of supervised release.

UC Davis officials have said they are "very concerned about this alleged fraud" and they are continuing an ongoing internal investigation of the incident.

The whistleblower complaint, filed in August 2006, was followed by Benford's November 2006 resignation, when she received a lump-sum pension of \$268,688. According to Senior Associate Vice Chancellor of Human Resources Dennis Shimek, the university can't do anything to withhold the money because employees under federal investigation have still earned the pension that they have worked for.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney R. Steven Lapham, who was a prosecutor in the Unabomber trial of Theodore Kaczynski.

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