

Former Congress chief of staff pleads guilty to making false certification

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

WASHINGTON - Virginia M. Kontnik, 51, former chief of staff for a U.S. Senator from Colorado, has pleaded guilty to a charge of making a false certification, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher for the Criminal Division announced today.

Kontnik entered the plea today at a hearing before U.S. District Judge Michael E. Hegarty of the District of Colorado. According to a one-count criminal information filed at the federal court in Denver, from 1995 until February 2004, Kontnik was employed as a chief of staff in the U.S. Senate. In that position, Kontnik managed approximately 40 employees and was responsible for all personnel decisions. In particular, Kontnik had discretionary authority to determine staff bonuses and negotiate staff salaries.

Kontnik admitted that, in the fall of 2002, she engineered a plan to receive \$2,000 in unreported income from her personal assistant by triggering larger than normal salary payments to the personal assistant from which the personal assistant was directed to pay Kontnik \$2,000. Specifically, Kontnik caused the U.S. Senate to pay her personal assistant more than his normal bi-weekly salary on two occasions. After taxes and withholdings, the net surplus of the bonuses to her assistant was approximately \$3,800.

In the court documents, Kontnik admitted that she directed the personal assistant to pay her \$2,000 of the surplus in cash. The personal assistant did so, giving Kontnik an envelope containing 20 \$100 bills.

On May 13, 2003, Kontnik prepared, signed and filed her annual financial disclosure report which required that any gifts of \$285 or more from a single source be disclosed. Knowing the information about gifts she received was material to both the U.S. Senate and to the public, Kontnik failed to report the \$2,000 cash payment in any manner, certifying that her financial disclosure report was "true, complete, and correct to the best of [her] knowledge and belief."

Under the terms of her plea agreement, Kontnik faces up to a year in jail, a fine of up to \$100,000, a year of supervised release, and \$2,000 in restitution to the U.S. Senate. Sentencing is scheduled for July 6, 2007.

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