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Colorado Funeral Home Owner Admits to Swindling Families, Defrauding Federal Aid Programs

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A Colorado funeral home owner has pleaded guilty to federal charges after admitting she deceived grieving families by handing over fake ashes and defrauded the government of nearly \$900,000 in COVID-19 relief funds. The scheme, which spanned several years, included hiding dozens of decomposing bodies in unsanitary conditions.

Carie Hallford, 44, entered her guilty plea in U.S. District Court on Monday to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud. According to prosecutors, Hallford operated the Return to Nature Funeral Home in Penrose, Colorado, along with her husband, who is also facing

charges in the case. The pair are accused of betraying the trust of families during some of the most vulnerable moments in their lives.

Federal authorities revealed that Hallford knowingly provided families with containers filled with dry concrete dust instead of cremated remains. Investigators say the couple failed to properly cremate bodies and instead allowed them to decay in a storage facility without refrigeration. Law enforcement discovered 190 sets of human remains last October, stacked and left to rot in what officials described as “horrific” and “inhumane” conditions.

In addition to the abuse of funeral services, Hallford admitted to fraudulently obtaining federal pandemic relief funds. Prosecutors say she submitted false applications to the Small Business Administration (SBA), receiving nearly \$900,000 from programs designed to assist struggling businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of using the money for legitimate business needs, much of it was allegedly spent on personal expenses.

The disturbing case has shocked the small Colorado community and drawn nationwide scrutiny over the lack of oversight in the funeral industry. Colorado is one of the few states that does not require routine inspections of funeral homes, a gap many now say contributed to the scale of the deception.

Hallford faces up to 20 years in federal prison under the wire fraud charge. Her sentencing has not yet been scheduled. Prosecutors have not ruled out additional charges as the investigation continues, particularly related to the handling of human remains and the emotional harm inflicted on the families affected.

The plea agreement follows mounting pressure from families who were misled by the funeral home and from lawmakers calling for tighter regulations. While Hallford’s conviction offers some accountability, many victims have said no legal consequence will undo the trauma caused by the betrayal of their trust.

Federal and state authorities are continuing to identify the remains recovered from the facility. Efforts to return them to the correct families remain ongoing.

This case underscores the need for stricter enforcement and transparency in industries that handle the most sensitive aspects of life and death.