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**For Immediate Release**

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## **Ex-Convict with Record of Embezzlement Charged with Misappropriation of Public Money for Using County Consumer Opioid Settlement Grant Funds for Plastic Surgery, Vacations, and Personal Expenses**

### ***DA Calls for Employees to Report Suspected Theft or Malfeasance***

San Diego County District Attorney Summer Stephan announced charges today against a woman who was previously convicted of stealing over \$500,000 from her employer. Her latest scheme involved bilking San Diego County out of more than \$130,000 to fund her lavish lifestyle including two cosmetic plastic surgeries, luxury vacations, SDG&E bills for her personal homes, home improvement, and martial arts training.

Amy J. Knox, 45, has been charged with three felony counts of misappropriating public money and three felony counts of embezzlement with the white-collar fraud allegation for great taking from the over \$4 million consumer protection monies awarded by San Diego County to the nonprofit organization Harm Reduction-SD. The funds were part of the over \$50 billion secured by The California Attorney General as part of nationwide settlements and bankruptcy agreements from corporations implicated in the opioid epidemic. These consumer funds obtained from opioid settlements, were intended to increase prevention and treatment and reduce fentanyl deaths in the County.

“This defendant had a history of stealing large amounts of money from her employer and violating their trust, yet she was still able to be in charge of millions of dollars in public funds,” DA Stephan said. “Checks and balances exist for a reason, yet there was no evidence of a background check. Even after professional county staff raised concerns, County officials awarded a second contract to Harm Reduction-SD, allowing this defendant to line her pockets with public funds.”

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From July 2022 to June 2025, Knox served in the chief operating officer role for Harm Reduction-SD. She controlled the nonprofit's finances and was designated as the contract administrator for the County contracts, serving as the main liaison between Harm Reduction-SD and County contracting officials. Knox was responsible for oversight of the naloxone distribution, managing payroll, tax filings, vendor contracting, and supplies management.

Harm Reduction-SD received \$4.2 million from the County's Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services Department. The first contract in July 2022 was for Naloxone distribution. The second contract in August 2024 was for drug checking. This service was to check for the presence of fentanyl in illegal street drugs that community members in homeless encampments planned to ingest.

In January 2023, a concerned citizen alerted the County that Harm Reduction-SD CEO, Tara Stamos, was storing Narcan (opioid overdose reversal medication) under a tarp in her East County front yard in 100-degree weather. In April 2023, a financial audit completed by the county's professional employees uncovered significant financial control weaknesses, including insufficient bank reconciliations and a deficient general ledger.

The County then discovered that Knox had previous embezzlement convictions. Less than a year later in August 2024, Harm Reduction-SD was awarded the second contract.

During her embezzlement of public funds, Knox made thousands of purchases for personal items and services on at least four personal credit cards. From January 2024 to May 2025, she used Harm Reduction-SD's checking account to pay off her monthly credit card balances via electronic bank transfers. Her personal expenses on these cards included trips to Hawaii and Disneyland, high end women's clothing and cosmetics, various streaming service subscriptions, home improvement expenses, purebred dogs and dog training, and martial arts training. The total amount was more than \$90,000.

In addition to paying off her credit cards, from October 2023 to May 2025, Knox embezzled over \$10,000 in public funds to pay the SDG&E bills on two of her residential properties. She also used embezzled public funds to pay for \$30,000 worth of full body cosmetic surgery.

Knox's fraud came to light when she began to accuse Harm Reduction-SD's CEO, Tara Stamos of malfeasance. Stamos responded by reporting to the District Attorney's Office that she had discovered unauthorized transactions by Knox. The DA's Special Operations Division, which has a premier Public Integrity Unit, began the investigation that resulted in these charges. The investigation is ongoing to determine how this malfeasance occurred, why it was allowed to continue and to prevent it from happening again.

The County terminated both Harm Reduction-SD contracts in June 2025.

“When the county terminated the contract, there was no referral for criminal investigation to the DA’s Public Corruption Unit, as has been done by Board leadership in prior instances of suspected malfeasance,” DA Stephan said. “Consumer protection funds are public dollars that should be safeguarded. They are the public’s funds that must be treated with transparency and accountability.”

If any County employees in charge of public funds have information about suspected malfeasance, they should feel comfortable coming forward to report their concerns to the District Attorney’s Office. Under whistleblower laws, they will be protected.

“Whistleblowing is an important part of public safety,” DA Stephan said. “It is often the first line of defense against corruption and misuse of public funds.”

The District Attorney’s Public Integrity Unit investigates and prosecutes cases involving elected or appointed public officials, government employees committing crimes on the job, misuse of public funds or resources, fraud on the court and attorney misconduct. County employees or the public can submit a complaint on our website: <https://www.sdcda.org/preventing/public-integrity/> or by emailing DA Public Integrity Unit at [SDDAPublicIntegrity@sandiegoda.gov](mailto:SDDAPublicIntegrity@sandiegoda.gov).

Deputy District Attorney Matthew Dix is prosecuting this case, and DA Investigator Mark Kelley conducted the investigation.

Knox was arraigned today and pleaded not guilty. Her bail was set at \$200,000 and a bail review hearing is set for February 25 at 8:30 a.m. in Department 101. A readiness hearing is set for April 1 at 8:15 a.m. in Department 1102.

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**About the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office**

*The San Diego County DA’s Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.*