



PRESS RELEASE

USAID Official and Three Corporate Executives Plead Guilty to Decade-Long Bribery Scheme Involving Over \$550 Million in Contracts; Two Companies Admit Criminal Liability for Bribery Scheme and Securities Fraud

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For Immediate Release

Office of Public Affairs

Four men, including a government contracting officer for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and three owners and presidents of companies, have pleaded guilty for their roles in a decade-long bribery scheme involving at least 14 prime contracts worth over \$550 million in U.S. taxpayer dollars.

- Roderick Watson, 57, of Woodstock, Maryland, who worked as a USAID contracting officer, pleaded guilty to bribery of a public official;
- Walter Barnes, 46, of Potomac, Maryland, who was the owner and president of PM Consulting Group LLC doing business as Vistant (Vistant), a certified small business under the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) 8(a) contracting program, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery of a public official and securities fraud;

- Darryl Britt, 64, of Myakka City, Florida, who was the owner and president of Apprio, Inc. (Apprio), a certified small business under the SBA 8(a) contracting program, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery of a public official; and
- Paul Young, 62, of Columbia, Maryland, who was the president of a subcontractor to Vistant and Apprio, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery of a public official.

In addition, Apprio and Vistant, both of which contracted with USAID, have agreed to admit criminal liability and enter into three-year deferred prosecution agreements (DPAs) in connection with criminal informations filed today in the District of Maryland. As part of these resolutions, both Apprio and Vistant admitted to engaging in a conspiracy to commit bribery of a public official and securities fraud. The DPAs entered into with Apprio and Vistant require each company to, among other obligations, provide ongoing cooperation with and disclosures to the Justice Department, implement a compliance and ethics program, and report to Justice Department regarding remediation and implementation of these compliance measures.

“The defendants sought to enrich themselves at the expense of American taxpayers through bribery and fraud,” said Matthew R. Galeotti, Head of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “Their scheme violated the public trust by corrupting the federal government’s procurement process. Anybody who cares about good and effective government should be concerned about the waste, fraud, and abuse in government agencies, including USAID. Those who engage in bribery schemes to exploit the U.S. Small Business Administration’s vital economic programs for small businesses — whether individuals or corporations acting through them — will be held to account.”

“Watson was entrusted to serve the interests of the American people — not his own — and his criminal actions for his own personal gain undermine the integrity of our public institutions,” said U.S. Attorney Kelly O. Hayes for the District of Maryland. “Public trust is a hallmark of our nation’s values, so corruption within a federal government agency is intolerable. This office, along with our law enforcement partners, will continue to pursue and prosecute corruption at every level to ensure accountability and protect public trust.”

“The guilty pleas reflect the FBI’s unwavering commitment to holding accountable all those who abuse the authority and responsibility of public service,” said Assistant Director Joe Perez of the FBI’s Criminal Division. “The actions of the defendants in this scheme serve to erode public trust. The FBI is focused on rebuilding this trust and protecting American taxpayers from corruption through investigations such as these.”

“Corruption in government programs will not be tolerated. Watson abused his position of trust for personal gain while federal contractors engaged in a pay-to-play scheme,” said Acting Assistant Inspector General for Investigations Sean Bottary of the USAID Office of Inspector General (USAID-OIG). “USAID-OIG is firmly committed to rooting out fraud and corruption within U.S. foreign assistance programs. Today’s announcement underscores our unwavering focus on

exposing criminal activity, including bribery schemes by those entrusted to faithfully award government contracts. We appreciate our longstanding partnership with the Department of Justice in holding accountable those who defraud American taxpayers.”

“Watson exploited his position at USAID to line his pockets with bribes in exchange for more than \$550 million in contracts. While he helped three company owners and presidents bypass the fair bidding process, he was showered with cash and lavish gifts,” said Chief Guy Ficco of IRS Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI). “Through its financial crime investigations, IRS-CI works to protect taxpayer dollars and ensure government funds are awarded based on merit — not corruption. In close coordination with our law enforcement partners, IRS-CI helped put an end to their greed and criminal conduct. Now, Watson and his co-conspirators will face justice.”

Overview of Bribery Scheme

According to court documents, beginning in 2013, Watson, while a USAID contracting officer, agreed with Britt to receive bribes in exchange for using Watson’s influence to award contracts to Apprio. As a certified small business under the SBA 8(a) contracting program, which helps socially and economically disadvantaged businesses, Apprio could access lucrative federal contracting opportunities through set-asides and sole-source contracts exclusively available to eligible contractors without a competitive bid process.

Vistant was a subcontractor to Apprio on one of the contracts awarded through Watson’s influence. After Apprio graduated from the SBA 8(a) program and it was no longer eligible to be a prime contractor for new contracts with USAID under this program, the scheme shifted so that Vistant became the prime contractor and Apprio became the subcontractor on USAID contracts awarded through Watson’s influence between 2018 and 2022.

During the scheme, Britt and Barnes paid bribes to Watson that were often concealed by passing them through Young, who was the president of another subcontractor to Apprio and Vistant. Britt and Barnes also regularly funneled bribes to Watson, including cash, laptops, thousands of dollars in tickets to a suite at an NBA game, a country club wedding, downpayments on two residential mortgages, cellular phones, and jobs for relatives. The bribes were also often concealed through electronic bank transfers falsely listing Watson on payroll, incorporated shell companies, and false invoices. Watson is alleged to have received bribes valued at more than approximately \$1 million as part of the scheme.

In exchange for the bribe payments, Watson influenced the award of contracts to Apprio and Vistant by manipulating the procurement process at USAID through various means, including recommending their companies to other USAID decisionmakers for non-competitive contract awards, disclosing sensitive procurement information during the competitive bidding process, providing positive performance evaluations to a government agency, and approving decisions on the contracts, such as increased funding and a security clearance.

Apprio and Vistant also agreed to resolve concurrently with the Justice Department in its separate Civil False Claims Act investigations relating to the bribery scheme.

Overview of Vistant Securities Fraud Scheme

According to court documents, in 2022, Barnes and Watson defrauded a licensed small business investment company (SBIC), in furtherance of the bribery scheme, by inducing it into executing a credit agreement with Vistant. Through the credit agreement, Barnes caused Vistant to issue stock warrants that, if exercised, would result in the SBIC having a 40% equity stake in Vistant. The credit agreement also provided for a \$14 million loan to Vistant from which Barnes could pay himself a \$10 million dividend. Prior to executing the credit agreement, Watson agreed at Barnes's request to speak with the SBIC about Vistant's performance as a government contractor on USAID contracts. When speaking with the SBIC, Watson omitted that Barnes had bribed Watson to obtain USAID contracts for years. Watson's endorsement of Vistant thereafter induced the SBIC to enter into the credit agreement with Barnes.

Overview of Apprio Securities Fraud Scheme

According to court documents, in 2023, Apprio, acting through Britt, engaged in a scheme in which Apprio fraudulently induced a private equity firm, which had an investment pool that was licensed as a SBIC, to purchase from Apprio's parent company a 20% equity stake in the company for \$4 million and simultaneously extend it a \$4 million loan secured by shares of Apprio stock. In addition to making false material representations in the stock purchase and loan agreements, Britt intentionally omitted during his negotiations the material fact that he had bribed Watson for years, which was intended to deceive and induce the private equity company into executing the agreements.

Deferred Prosecution Agreements with Apprio and Vistant

The Justice Department reached its resolution with Apprio based on several factors, including Apprio's credit for clearly accepting responsibility for its criminal conduct, fully cooperating in the investigation and engaging in timely remedial measures. Based on these factors, the criminal penalty calculated under the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines reflects a 10% reduction off the bottom of the applicable Guidelines fine range pursuant to the Criminal Division Corporate Enforcement and Voluntary Self-Disclosure Policy (CEP). According to court documents, Apprio agreed that the appropriate criminal penalty based on the law and facts in its case is \$51,673,185; however, Apprio also met its burden of establishing an inability to pay the criminal penalty sought. Based on the Justice Department's independent analysis, it determined that paying a criminal penalty and civil settlement greater than \$500,000 would substantially threaten the continued viability of Apprio. Accordingly, the Justice Department determined that the appropriate resolution of this case is a DPA and a payment of \$500,000 in a civil settlement.

Similarly, the Justice Department reached its resolution with Vistant based on a number of factors, including Vistant's credit for clearly accepting responsibility for its criminal conduct and cooperating with the investigation. Although Vistant's cooperation was initially delayed and limited, Vistant began to fully cooperate thereafter. Vistant also received credit for engaging in timely remedial measures. Based on these factors, the penalty calculated under the Guidelines reflects a 5% reduction off the bottom of the applicable Guidelines fine range pursuant to the CEP. Vistant agreed that the appropriate criminal penalty based on the law and facts in its case is \$86,407,740; however, Vistant also met its burden of establishing an inability to pay the criminal penalty sought. Based on the Justice Department's independent analysis, it determined that paying a criminal penalty and civil settlement greater than \$100,000 would substantially threaten the continued viability of Vistant. Accordingly, the Justice Department determined that the appropriate resolution of this case is a DPA and a payment of \$100,000 in a civil settlement.

Watson is scheduled to be sentenced on Oct. 6, and faces a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison. Young is scheduled to be sentenced on Sept. 3 and faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison. Britt is scheduled to be sentenced on July 28 and faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison. Barnes is scheduled to be sentenced on Oct. 14 and faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

The FBI, USAID-OIG, and IRS-CI are investigating the cases.

Trial Attorneys Matt Kahn and Brandon Burkart of the Criminal Division's Fraud Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Patrick D. Kibbe for the District of Maryland are prosecuting the cases.

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