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MONDAY, APRIL 16, 2018  
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## **SCHOOL OWNER PLEADS GUILTY TO \$2 MILLION BRIBERY SCHEME INVOLVING VA PROGRAM FOR DISABLED MILITARY VETERANS**

WASHINGTON – The owner of Atius Technology Institute (“Atius”), a privately owned, non-accredited school specializing in information technology courses, pleaded guilty today to bribing a public official at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in exchange for the public official’s facilitation of over \$2 million in payments that were supposed to be dedicated to providing vocational training for military veterans with service-connected disabilities. Acting Assistant Attorney General John P. Cronan of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division and U.S. Attorney Jessie K. Liu for the District of Columbia made the announcement.

Albert S. Poawui, 41, of Laurel, Maryland, pleaded guilty to an Information alleging one count of bribing a public official. The plea was entered before U.S. District Judge John D. Bates of the District of Columbia.

According to Poawui’s admissions made in connection with his plea, the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program is a VA program that provides disabled U.S. military veterans with education and employment-related services. VR&E program counselors advise veterans under their supervision which schools to attend and facilitate payments to those schools for veterans’ tuition and necessary supplies.

According to admissions made in connection with Poawui’s plea, in or about August 2015, Poawui and a VR&E program counselor agreed that Poawui would pay the counselor a seven percent cash kickback of all payments made by the VA to Atius. In exchange, the counselor steered VR&E program veterans to Atius and approved Atius’s invoices for payment.

Poawui admitted that the counselor and a second VR&E counselor approved payments to Atius without regard for the accuracy of necessary documentation in order to maximize the scheme’s profits. Between August 2015 and December 2017, Poawui and the scheme’s other participants caused the VA to pay Atius approximately \$2,217,259.44. Poawui paid the first VR&E counselor over \$155,000 as part of the illicit bribery scheme. These bribery payments were hand-delivered by Poawui or an Atius employee to the VR&E counselor or the counselor’s assistant, a veteran who was enrolled in the VR&E program.

Poawui also admitted that, with the knowing assistance of a second Atius employee, he made numerous false representations to the VA to enhance the scheme’s profits. For example,

Poawui and the second employee certified to the VA that veterans attending Atius were enrolled in up to 32 hours of class per week, when in fact both knew that Atius offered a maximum of six weekly class hours. After the VA initiated an administrative audit of Atius, Poawui, the VR&E counselor and the Atius employee took steps to conceal the truth about earlier misrepresentations they had made to the VA.

Poawui's plea is the result of an ongoing investigation by the FBI's Washington Field Office and the VA Office of Inspector General. Trial Attorney Simon J. Cataldo of the Criminal Division's Public Integrity Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Sonali D. Patel of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia are prosecuting the case.

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