



**Justin P. Wilson, Comptroller**

January 26, 2016

## **Investigations Reveal Theft from Clay County Rescue Squad and Pea Ridge Volunteer Fire Department**

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office has released two special investigations involving the theft of money from the Clay County Rescue Squad and the Pea Ridge Volunteer Fire Department in Celina, TN. These investigations were completed in conjunction with the District Attorney General's Office of the 13<sup>th</sup> Judicial District.

The same man, Laurence Bradford Stafford, is at the center of both investigations. Mr. Stafford is the former Captain of the Clay County Rescue Squad and the former chief of the Pea Ridge VFD.

Investigators found that from January 2013 through September 2015, Mr. Stafford used Rescue Squad funds totaling at least \$4,485 for his personal benefit or the personal benefit of others. Some of this money was collected during Rescue Squad fundraisers.

Additionally, Mr. Stafford charged, and allowed others to charge, fuel for personal use on the Rescue Squad's account. He also allowed undocumented reimbursement payments to himself and other Rescue Squad members from the Rescue Squad bank account. Investigators were unable to determine if the payments were for legitimate Rescue Squad expenses.

A separate investigation into the Pea Ridge Volunteer Fire Department revealed that former chief Stafford and his wife, former assistant fire chief Tabitha Stafford, took at least \$8,705 in Fire Department funds for their personal benefit. Mr. and Mrs. Stafford used the money to make purchases including two mobile homes and a vehicle. They received other payments totaling \$4,475 for which there was no supporting documentation.

The Pea Ridge investigation also uncovered similar problems with allowing inappropriate fuel purchases and undocumented reimbursement payments with Volunteer Fire Department funds.

The Volunteer Fire Department's bank balance decreased from more than \$38,000 in April 2012, when Mr. Stafford became fire chief, to a deficit of \$62 in September 2015.

In December 2015, the Clay County Grand Jury indicted Laurence Bradford Stafford, Tabitha Stafford, and five others on several counts of theft and conspiracy to commit theft.

"A simple change in the way money is handled could have prevented these thefts from occurring," Comptroller Justin P. Wilson said. "In both cases, officials failed to separate financial duties between multiple individuals and provide appropriate oversight. This problem is at the heart of nearly every theft we investigate."

To view both special investigation reports online, go to: <http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/ia/>.

If you suspect fraud, waste or abuse of public money in Tennessee, call the Comptroller's toll-free hotline at (800) 232-5454, or file a report online at: [www.comptroller.tn.gov/hotline](http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/hotline). Follow us on twitter: [@TNCOT](https://twitter.com/TNCOT)

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