



U.S. Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PRESS RELEASE

**FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND FORMER EMPLOYEE OF QUEENS
DEFENDERS LEGAL SERVICES NON-PROFIT SENTENCED TO PRISON FOR
EMBEZZLING FUNDS**

***Defendants Lori Zeno and Rashad Ruhani Stole Over \$400,000 for Personal Vacations,
Luxury Shopping, and a Penthouse Apartment***

Earlier today, in federal court in Brooklyn, Lori Zeno, the former executive director of Queens Defenders, a nonprofit legal services organization, and Rashad Ruhani, a former employee of the Organization, were sentenced by United States District Judge Rachel P. Kovner for their roles in a scheme to embezzle hundreds of thousands of dollars from Queens Defenders. Judge Kovner sentenced Zeno to 43 months' imprisonment and Ruhani to 57 months' imprisonment. The defendants were also ordered to pay \$656,349.57 in restitution to Queens Defenders and forfeiture money judgments of \$187,014.24 (Zeno) and \$102,534.27 (Ruhani).

Joseph Nocella, Jr., United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, James C. Barnacle, Jr., Assistant Director in Charge, Federal Bureau of Investigation, New York Field Office (FBI), and Nadia I. Shihata, Commissioner, New York City Department of Investigation (DOI), announced the sentences.

"Lori Zeno brazenly betrayed and abused her position of trust as the director of a nonprofit organization, while Rashad Ruhani worked hand in hand with her to steal funds intended to provide legal services and other critical resources to disadvantaged members of the community," stated United States Attorney Nocella. "Instead of upholding the law and serving those in need, the defendants greedily served themselves by spending those funds on luxury goods, lavish travel, and other personal indulgences. Today's sentences serve as a reminder that our Office will continue to vigorously prosecute those who steal public funds and thereby deprive our communities of essential services."

“Rather than honoring their responsibility to the community and safeguarding the resources entrusted to them, Lori Zeno and Rashad Ruhani chose to embezzle non-profit funds for their own interests. Their actions deprived people who needed and deserved legal support. Today’s sentencing reinforces our commitment to protecting the integrity of the services non-profits provide,” stated FBI Assistant Director in Charge Barnacle.

“Providing indigent New Yorkers with access to quality legal services is essential to ensuring a justice system governed by the rule of law and respect for constitutional rights. Lori Zeno and Rashad Ruhani betrayed their responsibility to help indigent New Yorkers through the City-funded legal services organization that Zeno co-founded and where Ruhani worked. Instead, they chose to embezzle hundreds of thousands of dollars from the organization, spending lavishly on themselves, including on a penthouse apartment, a vacation to Bali, and extravagant purchases at luxury retailers. Today, they stand convicted and face the consequences of their crimes. I thank the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of New York and the New York Office of the FBI for working with us to hold accountable anyone who misuses City funds and compromises vital services to New Yorkers.” stated DOI Commissioner Shihata.

As set forth in court filings, Zeno co-founded and served as the executive director of Queens Defenders, which provided legal services and community support services to indigent residents of Queens, New York. Zeno hired Ruhani to work for Queens Defenders in October 2023.

Between June 2024 and January 2025, Zeno and Ruhani engaged in a corrupt scheme to embezzle funds from Queens Defenders, diverting hundreds of thousands of dollars for their own personal benefit, including spending these stolen funds on foreign travel, expensive meals, luxury shopping, and rent for a penthouse apartment (the Penthouse Apartment). Zeno and Ruhani made extravagant purchases with the Queens Defenders’ credit cards, spending over \$10,000 on a vacation to Bali; \$1,700 at a luxury resort in Santa Monica, California; \$3,300 for an 85-inch smart television to be installed at the Penthouse Apartment; thousands of dollars in food deliveries to the Penthouse Apartment; and thousands of dollars at luxury retailers such as Ralph Lauren and Neiman Marcus. In one instance, Zeno and Ruhani charged over \$4,000 to a Queens Defenders credit card to buy a Louis Vuitton designer handbag. As part of the conspiracy, Zeno and Ruhani repeatedly lied to the Queens Defenders, falsely characterizing personal expenses as business expenses to obtain approval for the expenditures. To pay for the Penthouse Apartment, Zeno and Ruhani fraudulently obtained reimbursements from Queens Defenders for over \$39,000 in rent by submitting lease documents that were altered to conceal Zeno’s involvement. Zeno also secured lucrative positions at Queens Defenders for relatives and associates of Ruhani who did little or no substantive work, including hiring a woman married to Ruhani as the director of a non-existent “health and wellness” program with a salary of \$60,000. As a result of Zeno and Ruhani’s misuse of its funds, Queens Defenders lost its city contract to provide criminal defense services to low-income New Yorkers.

The government’s case is being handled by the Office’s Public Integrity Section. Assistant United States Attorneys Russell Noble, Sean M. Sherman, and Brooke Theodora are in charge of the prosecution, with assistance from Paralegal Specialists Johnson Peow and Daniel Arakawa.

The Defendants:

LORI ZENO

Age: 65

Garden City, New York

RASHAD RUHANI

Age: 56

Corona, New York

E.D.N.Y. Docket No. 25-CR-182 (S-1) (RPK)