

Statement of Facts

Esther Dikongue was a staffer employed by the Legislative Office of Senator A from Fall 2019 until March 17, 2023. The Maryland Senatorial Scholarship is offered to Maryland residents who plan to pursue a postsecondary education at qualifying colleges. The scholarships are offered and awarded through legislative delegations by specific districts.

Maryland State Senators are provided a budget of approximately \$50,000 for Maryland Senatorial Scholarships annually. Each Senator has discretion to determine selection criteria for student award recipients, and the division of scholarship amounts among awarded students. The Maryland Higher Education Commission (“MHEC”) facilitates the disbursements of scholarships to the scholarship recipients.

Senator A created a Scholarship Committee comprised of community volunteers. The Scholarship Committee’s role is to review scholarship applications and to make recommendations to Senator A regarding student awards. Senator A’s Office receives scholarship applications via email, and the Senator’s staff is responsible for administratively coordinating with the Scholarship Committee, as well as communicating with student applicants and MHEC. To qualify for a Maryland Senatorial Scholarship from Senator A, a student must reside in Senator A’s legislative district and must either attend a Maryland college or provide documentation that an out-of-State school offers a qualifying unique major not available through a Maryland school. Students must also write an essay that responds to questions provided by Senator A. All students are required to follow the application process to be considered for the Maryland Senatorial Scholarship award from Senator A. Once the scholarship award is made to a student, MHEC automatically renews the same amount for subsequent school terms until the student completes their degree. Senator A’s award amounts range from \$500 to \$5,000 per student; Senator A awards \$5,000 only under rare circumstances.

While employed by Senator A, Dikongue’s responsibilities included, but were not limited to, checking and monitoring Senator A’s email account and administering, monitoring, and interacting with the Scholarship Committee. As a staff member, Dikongue was provided with the password for Senator A’s senatorial email account. Dikongue was allowed to respond to Senator A’s official emails, but only using her own signature line. Once the Committee selects a student candidate for a scholarship award, Senator A’s staff is responsible for communicating the student’s assigned MHEC ID and awarded amount of the scholarship funds to MHEC.

Dikongue established an account through MDCAPS in her own name and in her personal capacity, and was assigned student ID number 1313214. Dikongue also applied for a “unique major” through MHEC for her “Ethics, Peace, and Human Rights” Master’s Program at American University, Washington, D.C., which was approved by MHEC as a “unique major” that is not offered by an Maryland college. Dikongue never submitted a scholarship application with Senator A’s Office, nor did she complete the required essay. Therefore, Dikongue was never considered by the Scholarship Committee as a prospective scholarship candidate, and was never chosen for a scholarship award by Senator A. However, in July 2022, Dikongue awarded herself a Senatorial Scholarship by advising MHEC via email that she was one of the students who was selected to receive scholarship funds through Senator A’s selection process. She advised MHEC employee L.R. via email that she needed to be “grant[ed] access” to her own student portal, among others,

to award funds. L.R. responded to Dikongue's email and asked what the award amounts for Dikongue and another student were, and on July 15, 2022, Dikongue advised that the award for the other student was \$1,200 and that the award for herself was \$10,000. L.R. emailed Dikongue again to confirm whether she meant \$10,000 and not \$1,000 should be awarded to her account, and Dikongue confirmed, "Yes, it is \$10,000." On July 18, 2022, L.R. emailed Dikongue and advised that "[t]he students have been awarded." Dikongue directed the Maryland funds fraudulently awarded to her portal be sent to American University, a school in Washington, D.C. where she was enrolled in the Ethics, Peace, and Human Rights Master's Program. Dikongue's last day of employment with Senator A was March 17, 2023.

On May 26, 2024, after Dikongue's employment with Senator A had ended, Dikongue secretly and without permission, logged onto Senator A's email account using Senator A's password, which had not been changed since the last day of Dikongue's employment. On May 26, 2024, Dikongue sent an email from Senator A's senatorial email to MHEC and advised MHEC: "[O]ur office authorizes her scholarship for the spring of 2025 to be moved to [a student's] [s]ummer I semester of 2024, as she will graduate in the fall of 2024. Her name is Esther Dikongue, and her MHEC ID is 1313214." Dikongue signed off this emailing using the signature lines of Legislative Aide, J.O. and Legislative Aide, S.C., without their knowledge or permission. On May 28, 2024, Dikongue accessed Senator A's email account again, and sent a second email to MHEC. In this email, Dikongue clarified for MHEC that the scholarship referenced in the May 26, 2024 email was a "renewal" and that "the student needs [the funds] this summer." Dikongue again used the signature lines of Legislative Aide, J.O. and Legislative Aide, S.C., without their knowledge or permission. On June 22, 2024, Dikongue accessed Senator A's email account again, and sent a third email to MHEC. In this email, Dikongue advised MHEC that "[i]f you cannot apply the spring funds to the summer, apply the full award to the fall semester." Dikongue used the signature lines of Legislative Aid, J.O. and Legislative Aid, S.C., without their knowledge or permission. In this email, Dikongue used the signature lines of Legislative Aide, J.O. and Legislative Aide, S.C. for a third time, without their knowledge or permission. Based on the false information Dikongue provided to MHEC, MHEC accordingly reallocated the award amount for the full academic year to Dikongue's account for the Fall 2024 semester.

Dikongue received disbursements of senatorial scholarship funding totaling \$20,000.

If called to testify, employees of MHEC and members of Senator A's staff would identify Esther Dikongue as the individual who took the aforementioned scholarship money from the from the Maryland Legislative Scholarship Fund.