



NEWS RELEASE

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VIRGINIA TECH STUDENT CHARGED WITH MULTIPLE ARSONS

United States Attorney John L. Brownlee and Montgomery County Commonwealth's Attorney Brad Finch announced today that Robert Andrew Lawson, age 23, of Blacksburg, Virginia, was indicted by a federal Grand Jury sitting in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Lawson was charged in a three count indictment with maliciously damaging by means of fire a building or other real property used in interstate or foreign commerce or in any activity affecting interstate or foreign commerce. If convicted, Lawson faces a minimum prison sentence of five years and a maximum penalty of up to 20 years imprisonment and/or a fine of \$250,000.00, as to each count.

"Mr. Lawson's attempt to burn these apartment buildings posed a real threat to many Virginia Tech students and other tenants," said U.S. Attorney Brownlee. "Working with our state partners, we will do our best to make certain that Mr. Lawson is brought to justice."

On July 19, 2007, at approximately 9:55 p.m., members of the Blacksburg Fire Department responded to a 911 emergency call from the defendant, Robert A. Lawson. The defendant had reported that there was a fire in the basement common area used by tenants for storage and laundry in Building 5500 of Terrace View Apartments. The fire did damage, burn, and char the structure of the real property. After extinguishing the fire, a Fire Code Official conducted a cause and origin investigation of the fire. The official concluded, after ruling out all natural and accidental causes of ignition, that the fire originated in a storage unit in the laundry room of the apartment complex and ruled the fire as "suspicious."

On August 31, 2007, at approximately 3:07 a.m., members of the Blacksburg Fire Department responded to a report of a fire located in Building 5500 of Terrace View Apartments. After extinguishing the fire, a Fire Code Official conducted a cause and origin investigation of the fire. The official concluded, after ruling out all natural and accidental causes of ignition, that the fire originated in the water heater room of Building 5500 and that the cause of the fire was arson. The fire that resulted from the arson did damage, burn, and char the structure of the real property. While attempting to suppress the fire, police and fire fighters observed the defendant in the area of the fire. The defendant was seen holding a portable police scanner. Following the second arson, the storage-laundry area of

the 5500 building was secured.

On September 20, 2007, at approximately 4:23 a.m., members of the Blacksburg Fire Department responded to a report of a fire located in Building 5100 at the Terrace View Apartments at 1252 Progress Street. Building 5100 is located across a small parking lot from Building 5500. After extinguishing the fire, a Fire Code Official conducted a cause and origin investigation of the fire. The Official concluded, after ruling out all natural and accidental causes of ignition, that the fire originated in the storage unit area of Building 5100 and that the cause of the fire was arson. The fire that resulted from the arson did damage, burn, and char the structure of the real property. Police and fire fighters observed the defendant at the scene of the arson, being one of the first four persons to arrive at the scene. A hydrocarbon gas detector, which is a device that can detect trace amounts of accelerants after a fire, alerted officials to the presence of hydrocarbon gas on the person of the defendant.

The investigation of the case was conducted by the Virginia State Police, Blacksburg Police Department, Virginia Tech Police Department and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives. Assistant United States Attorney Donald R. Wolthuis will prosecute the case for the government. For further information, please contact AUSA Wolthuis, at (540) 857-2250.

A Grand Jury indictment is only a charge and not evidence of guilt. The defendant is entitled to a fair trial with the burden on the government to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

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