



Department of Justice

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SAULT STE. MARIE MAN SENTENCED TO 30 YEARS FOR ABUSIVE SEXUAL CONTACT WITH A MINOR

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN — U.S. Attorney Andrew Birge announced that Ralph Fletcher Hepner, Jr., 53, of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, was sentenced in U.S. District Court to 360 months' imprisonment for abusive sexual contact with a child under the age of twelve. In addition to the prison term, U.S. District Judge Paul L. Maloney ordered Hepner to serve five years of supervised release following his release from prison and to have no contact with the victim.

“The federal penalties for hands-on sexual abuse of a child under twelve are severe because the crime is so awful,” said U.S. Attorney Birge. “While children are resilient in many ways, they are robbed of their innocence and the trauma from this sort of offense endures for years. This sentence sends a strong deterrent message and will keep the victim and other potential victims safe from Hepner for years.”

The charge arose from an incident in early 2018, in which Hepner sexually abused a nine-year-old child at his home on the Sault Ste. Marie reservation. Sault Ste. Marie law enforcement became aware of the incident when the victim reported the abuse to a relative. After an extensive investigation, a federal grand jury indicted Hepner. He entered a plea of guilty to the abusive sexual contact charge on December 14, 2020.

This case is part of Project Safe Childhood, a nationwide initiative designed to protect children from online exploitation and abuse. The U.S. Attorney's Office, county prosecutor's offices, the Internet Crimes Against Children task force (ICAC), federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement are working closely together to locate, apprehend, and prosecute individuals who exploit children. The partners in Project Safe Childhood work to educate local communities about the dangers of online child exploitation, and to teach children how to protect themselves. For more information about Project Safe Childhood, please visit the following web site: www.projectsafefchildhood.gov. Individuals with information or concerns about possible child exploitation should contact local law enforcement officials.

The Sault Ste. Marie Tribal Police and the FBI investigated the case. Assistant U.S. Attorney Hannah N. Bobee prosecuted the case.

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