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Arizona legislator sentenced to probation in food stamp case

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PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona state Rep. Cecilia Velasquez was sentenced Thursday to a year of probation after pleading guilty to a misdemeanor charge of unlawfully using food stamps.

The punishment for the one-term Democrat from Litchfield Park didn't include any jail time but she was also ordered to serve 100 hours of community service.

Velasquez, 42, was accused of fraudulently obtaining \$1,726 in benefits from November 2013 through January 2015.

Her lawyer Roy Herrera has said she already paid back the money to the state — as required by the plea deal.

Officials have said Velasquez falsely claimed she had two dependents, gave a false address and allowed two other people to use her food stamp benefit card.

Herrera has said there was only one dependent at issue, a daughter who Hernandez falsely claimed still lived with her.

In a statement released after her sentencing, Velasquez apologized for mistakes she made in seeking the public assistance.

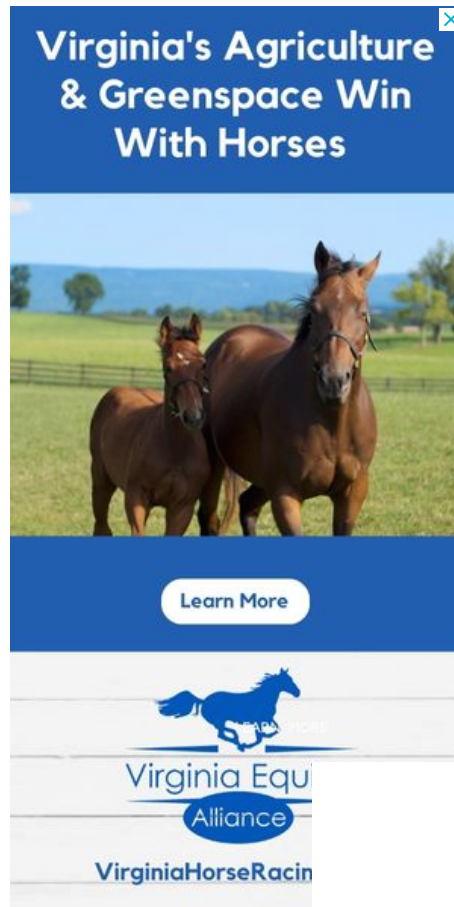
"I should be accountable for those mistakes — just like anyone else," Velasquez said. "I deeply regret that, and I apologize to the people I represent for making those mistakes."

Velasquez said she never had malicious intent in seeking the assistance several years ago when she was seriously ill and her family was struggling financially. She said she was grateful for the assistance because it helped feed her family and pull them out of poverty.

The lawmaker was initially charged with three felonies, but the deal she struck with prosecutors in late October dropped felony theft and fraud counts and allowed her to plead guilty to a reduced misdemeanor charge.

She dropped her re-election bid after being indicted. Her term in office ends in January.

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