



Terminally ill fraudster given "life sentence"

By Bill Rankin, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Adolphus Hill knew the sentence -- any sentence -- he received Friday would likely be a life term. A year ago, Hill pleaded guilty to his role in a fraudulent check-cashing scheme. Earlier this week, he was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer.

In an unusual court proceeding Friday, Hill lay handcuffed to his hospital bed at the Southern Regional Medical Center in Riverdale listening in a conference call to his sentence being handed down by a federal judge in an Atlanta courtroom.

Hill was one of eight people charged and convicted in a scheme that involved hundreds of stolen checks, most of which were cashed at gambling casinos in Louisiana and Mississippi. A member of the conspiracy was a U.S. postal employee who worked at the bulk mail center in Atlanta and stole boxes of new blank checks that had been ordered from banks and put in the mail. The ring also made false ID cards in the names of the individual account holders.

"I'm sorry about the victims and the people I've hurt," Hill told U.S. District Judge Bill Duffey. "I'm truly sorry." Duffey said he believes Hill's remorse is genuine. Because of his condition, Hill has had the chance to reflect on his lot in life and try and make amends, the judge said.

Duffey sentenced Hill to 84 months in prison, which was below the recommended term set by federal sentencing guidelines. The judge said his primary concern is to make sure Hill is quickly transferred to a facility with the best oncology treatment available in the federal prison system.

During the sentencing hearing, Hill's attorney, Thomas Wooldridge, stood at the foot of Hill's

hospital bed. A federal marshal sat to the side and two others stood guard by the door.

Wooldridge said he is concerned about where Hill will be placed and receive treatment. "Practically speaking, any sentence the court gives will very likely be a life sentence," the defense attorney said.

But Wooldridge objected to his client being handcuffed to the bed. And he expressed frustration that the U.S. Marshals Service had instructed him not to tell Hill's family where he was hospitalized.

"He's very ill," Wooldridge said in a telephone interview after the sentencing hearing. "He's not moving out of that bed without help."

Wooldridge said the family should know where Hill is and be able to visit him. "They can't even bring him flowers," he said. "Most people's greatest fear is the fear of dying alone. That's what could be about to happen to him."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Bill McKinnon acknowledged that the sentence "may well exceed Mr. Hill's life expectancy." But there are provisions that allow the U.S. Bureau of Prisons to release terminally ill patients before their entire sentences are served, he said.

"It may be appropriate in this case," he said. "Right now, we just don't know."

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