

U.S. Dept. of Justice: Second defendant sentenced to 5 years for attempted arson during 2020 civil unrest in Madison

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MADISON, WIS. – Timothy M. O’Shea, Acting United States Attorney for the Western District of Wisconsin, announced that Anessa Renee Fierro, 28, Madison, Wisconsin was sentenced today by Chief U.S. District Judge James D. Peterson to 5 years in prison for attempted arson. Fierro and her codefendant Willie Johnson were indicted by a federal grand jury for this offense in October 2020.

During the early morning hours of August 25, 2020, Fierro and Johnson attempted to set fire to two commercial buildings in downtown Madison. Business A was an office building, and Business B was a mixed-use rental property with apartments on the upper levels and retail space on the street level. Several apartments were occupied by sleeping residents at the time.

At Business A, Johnson helped a group of people break out the building’s front windows, and Fierro poured gasoline along the walls. Johnson then lit material that another individual tossed onto the gasoline, causing the vapors to ignite.

At Business B, Johnson and Fierro, along with several other people, broke out the retail store’s windows. With the interior of building exposed, Fierro poured gasoline along the front walls. Both Johnson and Fierro attempted to ignite the gasoline vapors with cigarette lighters, but they fled when officers from the Madison Police Department arrived.

At sentencing, Judge Peterson noted that pouring and igniting gasoline creates an

extraordinary risk to the community. Judge Peterson also told Fierro that her conduct was “appalling and dangerous” and warranted significant punishment. Johnson was sentenced by Judge Peterson to 5 years in federal prison on September 28, 2021.

The charge against Fierro was the result of an investigation conducted by the Madison Police Department and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Assistant U.S. Attorney Chadwick M. Elgersma prosecuted this case.