

Firefighter candidate trying to work in the South Pole forged medical documents

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U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Texas

HOUSTON – A 30-year-old man will have to submit to monitoring following his conviction related to his attempt to circumvent a needed and required screening process for those charged with protecting National Science Foundation (NSF) facilities in Antarctica, announced U.S. Attorney Alamdar S. Hamdani.

Brandon Mikula pleaded guilty April 23.

At his sentencing hearing, the court heard how Mikula's conduct was intended to circumvent the medical screening process the NSF imposes upon anyone joining the agency's mission in Antarctica. The court heard that by submitting false documents and providing false medical information during the screening, Mikula was attempting to undermine a process that aims to protect the lives of the individuals working at the NSF bases in Antarctica - and any rescuers that might be needed for a medical emergency.

"Antarctica is the highest, driest and coldest continent on earth. Average winter temperatures at dip below -75 degrees Fahrenheit. Medical evacuations from NSF's Antarctica facilities, in those harsh conditions, could take days or weeks in the winter," said Hamdani. "As a firefighter at the Antarctic Fire Department, Mikula would have been responsible for the daily safety of those occupying NSF's stations. While Mr. Mikula's misconduct may at first blush seem minor, his misconduct had the potential to end in tragedy for him and for others. That's why my office will work with agency partners like the NSF to ensure that any efforts to circumvent their requirements or deceive the public will result in accountability."

The screening process is designed to ensure applicants are medically and psychologically fit to endure the extreme conditions of life in Antarctica. Proper evaluations are necessary and important given the extreme risks of any rescue operation. Under optimal conditions, a medical evacuation could take several days or even a week - and only if a vessel is in the vicinity. Winter evacuations are high-risk events that may take weeks and may, depending on conditions, be impossible.

"It is imperative that federal contractors are fully qualified to perform critical functions, especially in Antarctica's extremely remote and harsh environment." said Allison Lerner, NSF Inspector General. The NSF - Office of Inspector General (OIG) is committed to vigorously pursuing oversight of the U.S. Antarctic Program, and I commend the U.S. Attorney's Office for its strong support in this effort."

The NSF's - Office of Polar Programs supports Arctic and Antarctic science through grants to research across the United States and by providing polar facilities and operational support. Among other things, NSF operates McMurdo Station, Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station and Palmer Station in Antarctica.

In 2022, an NSF contractor had hired Brandon Mikula, Mexico, Missouri, to work as a firefighter at the U.S. Antarctic Program's Antarctic Fire Department. The Antarctic Fire Department is responsible for all emergency responses for the Antarctic Program, including fire, rescue, emergency medical services, hazmat and other emergency situations. All buildings on the Antarctic bases are considered critical, and the loss of a single structure could effectively shut down a significant portion of station operations.

As a result, NSF required contractors like Mikula to undergo a rigorous medical screening process. Mikula also had to submit a physician's evaluation and other materials to staff at the UTMB-Galveston staff. Mikula provided false information on required NSF forms and hid, among other things, certain medical conditions and medications.

On Aug. 2, 2022, UTMB and NSF staff determined Mikula was not physically qualified to travel to Antarctica.

Subsequently, in an effort to reverse this determination, Mikula submitted false information. Among other things, Mikula faxed a letter to the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) from his primary care physician claiming he was medically fit; however, he had forged the letter. He also submitted other false documents and sent harassing emails to UTMB and NSF officials in efforts to reverse their determination. Ultimately, investigators identified that documents Mikula had submitted were forgeries.

U.S. District Judge Jeffrey V. Brown has now ordered Mikula to serve one year of probation, during which time he will need to submit to monitoring and other conditions.

NSF-OIG conducted the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Brad Gray is prosecuting the case.

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