



More Canberra men sentenced over \$1.6m Public Trustee embezzlement

By Jake Evans

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Two more men have been sentenced over a \$1.6 million fraud of the ACT Public Trustee Office.

Tradesman Stephen Evans, 33, was on Thursday sentenced to three years and nine months in jail for his part in a scheme of false transactions and incomplete jobs done on behalf of the Public Trustee Office.

But his co-offender, Donald Tawanda Suvanhu, 37, avoided prison with an 18-month suspended sentence.

Last year, another of the group of four, Joshua Leighton, 38, was sentenced to four years in jail for stealing more than \$500,000 between 2010 and 2013.

On Thursday, the ACT Supreme Court heard Evans defrauded significantly more than Suvanhu from the Public Trustee Office, and did it for longer, which contributed to his sentence.

Together with co-accused Timothy McLeod, 34, Evans took almost \$300,000 from what prosecutors called the "weak" and "vulnerable" clients whose estates the Public Trustee Office administered.

That money was then spent on what prosecutors called the "tawdry abuses" of drinking and gambling.

Justice Michael Elkaïm said Evans had an apparent lack of remorse for the crime and had not offered to repay his share of the stolen money.

"Ironically, the mother of the offender is in the same position of dependence as the victims," he said.

The Public Trustee Office manages the accounts of people with severe disabilities, children without a guardian, for deceased estates or where people are otherwise unable to manage their finances.

Evans made 101 fraudulent transactions over five years, invoicing "incapacitated" clients for work that was not completed or only partially done.

The court heard trust officers McLeod and Suvanhu would then process those invoices and pay them out.

Suvanhu was sentenced for defrauding 11 clients of the public trustee of almost \$30,000.

The court heard he had already paid back about half, including \$7,000 on the morning of his court appearance.

He was given a two-year good behaviour order, but Justice Elkaïm warned if it was breached, Suvanhu would be joining Evans and Leighton in jail.

The last of the four men, McLeod, will face court later this year.



PHOTO: Donald Tawanda Suvanhu was handed an 18-month suspended sentence for his part in the fraud.

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