

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Maryland

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, July 12, 2022

Eight Defendants Facing Federal Charges Relating to Over \$1.6 Million Dollars in Cares Act Covid-19 Fraud, including Identity Theft and Unemployment Insurance Fraud

The Defendants' Allegedly Submitted over 200 Fraudulent Unemployment Insurance Claims to the Maryland Department of Labor and California Department of Labor

Baltimore, Maryland – A federal grand jury has returned an indictment charging nine defendants in relation to a Maryland and California CARES Act COVID-19 unemployment insurance scheme. The indictment charges the defendants with wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, and theft of United States Postal Office arrow keys. The indictment was returned on June 21, 2022, and unsealed upon the defendants' self-surrenders and arrests. Charged in the indictment are:

Dementrous Von Smith, a/k/a "El Meecho", age 26, of Waldorf, Maryland;

Nadine Mahoro Mwamikazi, age 25, of Silver Spring, Maryland;

Sky Tiffany Lawson, age 28, of Bowie, Maryland;

Christopher Thomas Yancy, a/k/a "Lil Bhri", age 30, of Laurel, Maryland;

Sayquan Leon Bridges, a/k/a "Quan", age 27, of Bowie, Maryland;

Christian Malik Adrea, a/k/a "Lil Leak", age 24, of Michellville, Maryland;

Stephawn Malik Watson, a/k/a "O-Dawg", age 26, of District Heights, Maryland;

Aiyanna Mone Washington, a/k/a "Yanna", age 26, of Glenarden, Maryland.

Co-defendants Von Smith, Lawson, Bridges, Adrea and Washington had their initial appearances on July 7, 2022, before U.S. Magistrate Judge Coulson. Yancy, Mwamikazi, Watson had their initial appearances yesterday in U.S. District Court in Baltimore before U.S. Magistrate Judge Copperthite.

The indictment was announced by United States Attorney for the District of Maryland Erek L. Barron; Acting Postal Inspector in Charge Tira Hayward of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service - Washington Division (USPIS); Special Agent in Charge James C. Harris of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Baltimore; Special Agent in Charge Toni M. Crosby of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) Baltimore Field Division; Acting Special Agent in Charge Troy W. Springer, of the Washington Regional Office, U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG); Maryland State Police Superintendent Colonel Woodrow W. Jones III (MSP) and the Maryland State Police Criminal Enforcement Division; and Anne Arundel County Police Chief Amal E. Awad.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, unscrupulous individuals lined their own pockets with funds intended to aid struggling families,” said U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland, Erek L. Barron. “Our office remains committed to prosecuting those who commit CARES Act COVID-19 fraud.”

“An important mission of the Office of Inspector General is to investigate allegations of fraud related to the unemployment insurance program. We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to investigate these types of allegations,” stated Troy W. Springer, Acting Special Agent in Charge of the Washington Regional Office, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General.

According to the 40-count indictment, from February 2020 to October 2021 the defendants allegedly conspired to obtain numerous victim’s birthdates, social security numbers, and other personal identifying information to prepare and submit fraudulent applications for unemployment insurance (“UI”) benefits in Maryland and California. As part of the scheme to defraud, the defendants allegedly caused financial institutions to load UI benefits onto debit cards and mail the cards to physical addresses provided and monitored by the defendants. Additionally, the indictment alleges that once the defendants received the fraudulently obtained funds, the defendants made cash withdrawals and used the cash for their own financial benefit. As alleged in the indictment, the defendants submitted over 200 fraudulent UI claims and resulted in a loss of more than \$1.6 million dollars. The indictment continues to allege that in October 2021, Yancy unlawfully possessed a United States Postal Service arrow key with intent to improperly use the key.

If convicted, the defendants face a maximum sentence of 30 years in federal prison for the conspiracy as well as each count of wire fraud and two years in federal prison consecutive to any other sentence imposed for aggravated identity theft. Yancy faces a maximum sentence of 10 years for unlawfully possessing stolen United States Postal Service arrow keys. Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after taking into account the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

An indictment is not a finding of guilt. An individual charged by indictment is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty at some later criminal proceedings.

This investigation was a coordinated effort between the Anne Arundel County Police Department, Maryland State Police, Prince George’s County Police Department, United States Postal Inspector, U.S. Department of Labor, and the Department of Homeland Security and Investigations, under the Maryland Criminal Intelligence Network (MCIN). The Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services (GOCPYVS) provides grant funding and strategic support to MCIN member sites to identify, disrupt, and dismantle criminal organizations through inter-agency collaboration and data sharing to make Maryland safer.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by, among other methods, augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement efforts. For more information on the Department’s response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

Anyone with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice’s National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf->

[disaster-complaint-form](#). An indictment is not a finding of guilt. An individual charged by indictment is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty at some later criminal proceedings.

United States Attorney Erek L. Barron commended USPIS, HSI, ATF, DOL-OIG, the Maryland State Police, and the Anne Arundel County Police Department for their work in the investigation. Mr. Barron thanked the United States Marshals Service, the Prince George's County Police Department, the Montgomery County Police Department, the Virginia State Police Department, Howard County Police Department, the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department and the Charles County Sheriff's Office for their assistance. Mr. Barron thanked Assistant U.S. Attorney Colleen E. McGuinn, who is prosecuting the federal case.

For more information on the Maryland U.S. Attorney's Office, its priorities, and resources available to help the community, please visit www.justice.gov/usao-md and <https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/community-outreach>.

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Topic(s):
Coronavirus
Financial Fraud
Identity Theft

Component(s):
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