

**Department of Justice**

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Massachusetts

---

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, September 17, 2021

## **Dudley Man Pleads Guilty to Theft and Misuse of COVID-19 Pandemic Assistance**

BOSTON – A Dudley man pleaded guilty today in connection with his involvement in a scheme to fraudulently obtain and misuse COVID-19-related unemployment assistance.

Norman Higgs, 34, pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud conspiracy. U.S. District Court Judge Patti B. Saris scheduled sentencing for Dec. 17, 2021. Higgs was charged in May 2021.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) created a temporary federal unemployment insurance program called Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). PUA, administered by the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, provides unemployment insurance benefits for individuals who are not eligible for other types of unemployment benefits (e.g., the self-employed, independent contractors or gig economy workers).

From April to June 2020, Higgs conspired with others to submit fraudulent PUA claims using stolen identifying information of other individuals. The PUA payments were directed into bank accounts controlled by Higgs and others who used the funds for their personal benefit, including to pay off credit card debt and to fund digital currency and online retail brokerage accounts. In total, Higgs and others obtained over \$450,000 in proceeds from over 85 fraudulent PUA claims using stolen identities.

The charge of conspiracy to commit wire fraud provides for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Acting United States Attorney Nathaniel R. Mendell; Joseph R. Bonavolonta, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Division; and Nikitas Splagounias, Acting Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Office of Investigations-Labor Racketeering and Fraud made the announcement. The Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance provided assistance in the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Markham of Mendell's Securities, Financial & Cyber Fraud Unit is prosecuting the case.

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>.

**Topic(s):**

Coronavirus  
Financial Fraud

**Component(s):**

[USAO - Massachusetts](#)

Updated September 17, 2021