

PRESS RELEASE

Inland Empire Woman Pleads Guilty to Using Prison Inmates' Names to Fraudulently Obtain Over \$500,000 in COVID Jobless Relief

Monday, January 23, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Central District of California

LOS ANGELES – A San Bernardino County woman pleaded guilty today to fraudulently obtaining more than \$500,000 in COVID-19 pandemic-related unemployment insurance (UI) benefits by using the names of inmates locked up the California state prison system.

Cynthia Ann Hernandez, 33, a.k.a. "Cynthia Roberts," of Victorville, pleaded guilty to one count of mail fraud and one count of access device fraud in excess of \$1,000.

According to her plea agreement, from June 2020 to August 2020, Hernandez filed with the California Employment Development Department (EDD) fraudulent applications for UI benefits in the names of persons incarcerated in the California state prison system. EDD manages California's unemployment insurance benefit program.

Hernandez falsely stated on the UI benefits applications that the named claimants were individuals whose employment had been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and were eligible for pandemic unemployment assistance under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Congress passed the CARES Act in March 2020, in part, to help individuals whose employment and finances were adversely affected by the pandemic.

The applications also falsely stated that the named claimants were eligible for the UI benefits and that they resided and worked in Los Angeles and Orange counties. EDD then authorized Bank of America to issue debit cards in the claimants' names and were mailed to Hernandez's mailing address. Once Hernandez received the debit cards, she used them to withdraw cash at ATMs.

In total, Hernandez admitted to causing at least 29 fraudulent applications to be filed with EDD, resulting in losses to EDD and the United States Treasury of approximately \$515,138.

United States District Judge Mark C. Scarsi scheduled an April 17 sentencing hearing, at which time Hernandez will face a statutory maximum sentence of 20 years in federal prison for the mail fraud count and up to 15 years in federal prison for the access device fraud count.

This matter was investigated by the United States Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General; the California Employment Development Department – Investigation Division; Homeland Security Investigations; the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; the United States Department of Homeland Security – Office of Inspector General; the United States Postal Inspection Service; and United States Customs and Border Protection – Special Response Team.

Assistant United States Attorney Haoxiaohan Cai of the General Crimes Section is prosecuting this case.

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