Prince George's County Man Pleads Guilty to Cares Act Unemployment Insurance Fraud

Tuesday, September 23, 2025

For Immediate Release
U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Maryland

Greenbelt, Maryland – Terry Chen, 25, of Prince George's County, Maryland, pled guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and aggravated identity theft, in connection with submitting fraudulent CARES Act unemployment insurance (UI) claims.

Kelly O. Hayes, U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland, announced the guilty plea with Special Agent in Charge Troy W. Springer, National Capital Region, U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG), and Special Agent in Charge William J. DelBagno, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – Baltimore Field Office.

According to the plea agreement, beginning in 2021, and continuing until about September 2022, Chen and his co-conspirators engaged in a scheme to defraud the United States, the State of Maryland, multiple financial institutions, and multiple individuals, including multiple identity theft victims. The co-conspirators submitted false and fraudulent UI benefits claims to the Maryland Department of Labor (MD-DOL), Maryland's agency that is responsible for processing the claims. Chen participated in UI claims resulting in losses exceeding $1 million but less than $1.5 million. Additionally, Chen used debit cards issued in the names of aggravated identity theft victims to obtain UI fraud funds.

Co-conspirators Bryan Nushawn Ruffin, 27, of Woodbridge, Virginia, and Kiara Smith, 28, of Fort Washington, Maryland, were employed by a company that provided professional support services to the MD-DOL to review UI claims and administer UI benefits. As detailed in the plea agreement, Chen and his co-conspirators possessed and used computers that the company issued to Ruffin and Smith to access non-public UI data and databases maintained by the MD-DOL. Ruffin and Smith then granted Chen and his co-conspirators access to MD-DOL databases which they used to change information on existing UI claims.

This included the contact email address, online account password, and payment method for existing UI claims. The co-conspirators furthered the scheme by using the identity theft victims' personal identifying information (PII). They also used their access to the MD-DOL databases to upload and approve documents submitted in support of fraudulent UI claims, remove fraud holds on UI claims, certify weeks for determining UI benefits, and engage in other actions to facilitate the fraudulent UI benefits payments. During the scheme, the MD-DOL believed they were disbursing UI benefits to debit cards/accounts of UI applicants, but the accounts were allegedly opened and controlled by Chen and his co-conspirators.

Chen faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in federal prison for the wire fraud conspiracy; a mandatory sentence of two years, consecutive to any other imposed sentence, for aggravated identity theft; and 10 years for possession of a machine gun. Additionally, Chen is facing 20 years for possession with intent to distribute marijuana and life for possession of a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking.

Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties. A federal district court judge determines sentencing after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors. Chen's sentencing is currently set for February 2, 2026, at 10 a.m.

The District of Maryland COVID-19 Strike Force is one of five strike forces established throughout the United States by the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate and prosecute COVID-19 fraud, including fraud relating to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The CARES Act was designed to provide emergency financial assistance to Americans suffering the economic effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strike forces focus on large-scale, multi-state pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors. The strike forces are interagency law enforcement efforts, using prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams designed to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds.

For more information about the Department's response to the pandemic, visit 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 justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form.

U.S. Attorney Hayes commended the DOL-OIG and FBI for their work in the investigation along with the MD-DOL for its assistance. Ms. Hayes also thanked Assistant U.S. Attorneys Harry M. Gruber, Paul A. Riley, and Joseph L. Wenner, who are

prosecuting the case, and recognized the Maryland COVID-19 Strike Force and Paralegal Specialist Joanna B.N. Huber for their valuable assistance.

For more information about the Maryland U.S. Attorney's Office, its priorities, and resources available to report fraud, visit justice.gov/usao-md and justice.gov/usao-md/community-outreach.

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Contact
Kevin Nash
USAMD.Press@usdoj.gov
410-209-4946

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