PRESS RELEASE

Roswell Woman Sentenced for Multi-Year Fraud Schemes Targeting COVID Relief and Tax Refunds

Thursday, November 13, 2025

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

ALBUQUERQUE – A Roswell woman was sentenced to 60 months in prison for orchestrating multiple fraud schemes involving COVID-19 unemployment benefits and federal tax returns that defrauded federal and state agencies and individual taxpayers of more than $312,000.

There is no parole in the federal system.

According to court documents, between June 2020 and April 2021, **Melanie Willis, aka Melanie Vallejos**, 50, submitted fraudulent applications for unemployment insurance and pandemic unemployment assistance benefits to the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions (NMDWS) in her own name, assisted others in submitting fraudulent claims, and filed applications in others' names without their knowledge. **Willis** obtained $29,788 through fraudulent unemployment claims in her own name and caused losses of at least $183,420 from NMDWS, much of which she kept for herself. Investigators linked **Willis** to over 150 NMDWS accounts through internet activity.

Further, between at least 2017 and 2022, **Willis** also filed at least 34 false tax returns in the names of at least 15 victim taxpayers in the Roswell area while posing as a community tax return preparer or accountant. All returns contained false information designed to fraudulently inflate tax refunds and were filed without the victims' knowledge or consent. The tax fraud scheme resulted in losses of at least $137,062 in tax credits and refunds issued to the victim taxpayers, but most of which **Willis** redirected to addresses and bank accounts that she controlled.

Finally, between April 15, 2020, and June 30, 2021, **Willis** diverted and stole at least $27,200 in COVID-19 economic relief and impact payments from taxpayers by similarly using addresses she controlled and forging victim taxpayers’ signatures to deposit checks into her personal bank account.

The case originated in February 2022 following a referral from the Roswell Police Department, which had been investigating **Willis** for a separate state tax refund fraud scheme. In September 2021, search warrants executed at addresses used by **Willis** uncovered individual tax returns in others' names, notebooks full of personally identifying information, numerous debit cards and identification documents in victim taxpayers' names, and letters from NMDWS and the IRS addressed to identity theft victims.

In December 2024, **Willis** pled guilty to four counts of wire fraud, two counts of mail fraud, one count of aggravated identity theft, three counts of filing false, fictitious or fraudulent claims and eleven counts of theft of public money. Upon her release from prison, **Willis** will be subject to three years of supervised release. **Willis** was also ordered to pay $312,468.66 in restitution to individual victim taxpayers, the State of New Mexico, and the United States.

Acting U.S. Attorney Ryan Ellison made the announcement today.

The Department of Labor’s Office of Inspector General and the Internal Revenue Service’s Criminal Investigation Unit investigated this case with assistance from Homeland Security Investigations and the Roswell Police Department. Assistant U.S. Attorney Tavo Hall prosecuted the case with assistance from Department of Justice Tax Division Trial Attorney Matthew Hicks.

This press release was posted November 13, after the end of the federal government shutdown.

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Topic

FINANCIAL FRAUD

Component

USAO - New Mexico

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