

PRESS RELEASE

Temple Hills Man Pleads Guilty to Cares Act Unemployment Insurance Fraud and Firearms and Drug Trafficking Crimes

Monday, August 11, 2025

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Maryland

Greenbelt, Maryland – Lawrence Nathaniel Harris, 33, of Temple Hills Maryland, pled guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and aggravated identity theft, in connection with submitting fraudulent CARES Act unemployment insurance (UI) claims. Additionally, in a separate case, he pled guilty to possession of a machine gun, possession with intent to distribute a controlled substance, and possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug-trafficking offense.

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); Special Agent in Charge Charles Doerrer, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); Special Agent in Charge William J. DelBagno, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – Baltimore Field Office; and Chief George Nader, Prince George's County Police Department (PGPD).

According to the plea agreement, beginning in at least January 2021, and continuing until about September 2023, Harris and his co-conspirators engaged in a scheme to defraud the United States, the State of Maryland, multiple financial institutions, and multiple individuals, including 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. Harris participated in submitting UI claims resulting in losses exceeding \$550,000, but less than \$1.5 million, and he used debit cards issued in the names of aggravated identity theft victims to obtain UI fraud funds.

Company 1, which provided professional support services to the MD-DOL to review UI claims and administer UI benefits, employed co-conspirators Bryan Nushawn Ruffin, 27, of Woodbridge, Virginia, and Kiara Smith, 27, of Fort Washington, Maryland. As detailed

in the plea agreement, Harris and his co-conspirators possessed and used computers that Company 1 issued to Ruffin and Smith to access non-public UI data and databases maintained by the MD-DOL. Ruffin and Smith then granted Harris 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, MD-DOL believed it was disbursing UI benefits to the of UI applicants' debit cards/accounts, but Harris and his co-conspirators allegedly opened and controlled those accounts.

Harris also admitted that on November 16, 2022, while law enforcement executed a residential search warrant at his home, he threw a firearm and a bag of marijuana from his room. He possessed this firearm in furtherance of his drug-trafficking activities. Law enforcement then searched an attic in the residence that Harris had access to. Authorities found three additional firearms, including one that functioned as a machinegun, stored in the attic. Harris knew that the firearm functioned as a machine gun. Law enforcement also recovered approximately 37 pounds of marijuana that Harris intended to distribute.

Harris 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, 10 years for possession of a machine gun, 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. Harris's sentencing is set for Thursday, November 6, at 2 p.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.

This case is part of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a program bringing together all levels of law enforcement and the communities they serve to reduce violent crime and gun violence, and to make our neighborhoods safer for everyone. On May 26, 2021, the Department launched a violent crime reduction strategy strengthening PSN based on these core principles: fostering trust and legitimacy in our communities, supporting community-based organizations that help prevent violence from occurring in the first place, setting focused and strategic enforcement priorities, and measuring the results.

U.S. Attorney Hayes commended the DOL-OIG, ATF, FBI, and PGPD, for their work in the investigation and the MD-DOL for its assistance. Ms. Hayes also thanked Assistant U.S. Attorneys Harry M. Gruber, Paul A. Riley, Joseph L. Wenner, Christopher Sarma, and Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Lanay Mitchell, who are prosecuting this case. She also 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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