

PRESS RELEASE

Two Defendants Plead Guilty To Fraud Scheme Involving Data Stolen From Hospital Patients

Thursday, August 7, 2025

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York

United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Jay Clayton; Assistant Director in Charge of the New York Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation ("FBI"), Christopher G. Raia; and Special Agent in Charge of the Northeast Region of the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General ("DOL-OIG"), Jonathan Mellone, announced today that WILKINS ESTRELLA and CHARLENE MARTE pled guilty before U.S. District Judge Gregory H. Woods to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud in connection with using social security numbers and other personally identifiable information belonging to hundreds of victims to open debit cards and attempt to fraudulently obtain \$1.6 million in pandemic relief funds from the Internal Revenue Service ("IRS") and the New York State Department of Labor. The scheme resulted in almost \$1 million in actual losses. ESTRELLA, a former clerk at a Bronx hospital, is also charged with the wrongful disclosure of individually identifiable health information for accessing and stealing the data of at least 4,005 hospital patients for use in the fraud scheme. ESTRELLA pled guilty yesterday and is scheduled to be sentenced on December 1, 2025. MARTE pled guilty on July 28, 2025, and will be sentenced on November 5, 2025.

“Wilkins Estrella stole the personal data of thousands of people, including hospital patients, and used this data along with his partner Charlene Marte to claim money that was intended to assist struggling Americans during the pandemic,” said U.S. Attorney Jay Clayton. “Defrauding federal programs harms all New Yorkers and our Office is committed to stopping it.”

"Wilkins Estrella and Charlene Marte exploited thousands of patient records to steal almost one million dollars from various government programs," said FBI Assistant Director in Charge Christopher G. Raia. "These defendants misused sensitive identifying information to perpetuate this illicit scheme and reap unlawful proceeds. The FBI remains committed to pursuing any individual who targets confidential medical information for personal enrichment."

"Wilkins Estrella and Charlene Marte committed numerous frauds against multiple government agencies, including a scheme to defraud the New York State Department of Labor's unemployment insurance program by misusing the stolen identities of individuals to falsely obtain benefits," said DOL-OIG Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone. "We will continue to work with our federal and state law enforcement partners to safeguard the integrity of U.S. Department of Labor programs."

As alleged in public court filings, statements at public court proceedings, and the charging documents in the case:

From at least 2020 to 2022, ESTRELLA and his romantic partner, MARTE, misused the names, social security numbers, and other personally identifiable information belonging to hundreds of individuals to fraudulently obtain almost \$1 million in COVID-19 stimulus checks and tax refunds from the IRS and unemployment insurance benefits from the New York State Department of Labor. ESTRELLA and MARTE also arranged for these and other funds to be loaded onto hundreds of debit cards that they opened in other people's names using stolen data, and had the cards mailed to their homes and to the homes of their family members.

ESTRELLA and MARTE obtained this data from multiple sources, including a hospital in the Bronx where ESTRELLA worked as a business clerk for almost a decade. In 2020, ESTRELLA was terminated from that role after an internal systems audit revealed that he had improperly accessed the protected health information of at least 4,005 hospital patients.

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ESTRELLA, 40, of Hackensack, New Jersey, and MARTE, 31, of the Bronx, New York, each pled guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison. ESTRELLA also pled guilty to wrongful disclosure of individually identifiable health information, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison. In addition, ESTRELLA and MARTE each agreed that they are jointly and severally liable for \$951,618.20 in forfeiture and the same amount in restitution.

The statutory maximum penalties in this case are prescribed by Congress and provided here for informational purposes only, as the sentencing of the defendants will be determined by a judge.

Mr. Clayton praised the outstanding investigative work of the FBI and DOL-OIG and thanked the New York State Department of Labor for its assistance in the investigation of the case.

This case is being handled by the Office's General Crimes Unit. Assistant U.S. Attorney Jane Yumi Chong is in charge of the prosecution.

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