

**Department of Justice**

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of New Jersey

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, November 22, 2022

**Camden County Resident Sentenced to 41 Months in Prison  
for Defrauding COVID-19 Relief Programs and Illegally  
Possessing Firearm**

CAMDEN, N.J. – A Camden County, New Jersey, resident was sentenced to 41 months in prison for his role in fraudulently obtaining Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) benefits, fraudulently obtaining unemployment benefits, and illegally possessing a firearm, U.S. Attorney Philip R. Sellinger announced today.

Stephen Bennett, 46, of Berlin, New Jersey, previously pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Karen M. Williams to an information charging him with one count of bank fraud conspiracy, one count of wire fraud, and one count of being a felon in possession of a firearm. Judge Williams imposed the sentence on Nov. 21, 2022, in Camden federal court.

According to documents filed in this case and statements made in court:

In 2020, Bennett conspired with Rhonda Thomas, 38, of Sicklerville, New Jersey, to submit one PPP application and one EIDL application for a company controlled by Bennett. The applications stated that the company had 16 employees, gross revenues of \$1.73 million, and an average monthly payroll of \$144,000, when in fact the company had no employees, revenue, or payroll. Bennett and Thomas also submitted forged tax forms and altered bank statements as part of the PPP loan application. Based on the misrepresentations, the loans were approved in the amount of \$510,000. Bennett paid kickbacks of over \$150,000 to Thomas and used the rest of the fraudulently obtained PPP and EIDL loan proceeds to pay for personal expenses.

Also in 2020, Bennett defrauded the Pennsylvania Department of Labor by submitting 74 unemployment insurance claims under a temporary federal unemployment insurance program that provided benefits for individuals who were not eligible for other types of unemployment, such those who were self-employed, independent contractors or gig economy workers. Bennett collected personal identification information (PII), including names, residential addresses, and Social Security numbers, of other individuals and used the PII to submit fraudulent applications for unemployment benefits, resulting in the payment of \$425,339 in benefits to Bennett.

In May 2021, law enforcement officials executing a search warrant at Bennett's home found a .9 millimeter semiautomatic pistol with no serial number (commonly referred to as a "ghost gun") and a magazine loaded with 16 rounds of ammunition. Bennett is a previously convicted felon.

In addition to the prison term, Judge Williams sentenced Bennett to five years of supervised release, fined him \$15,000, and ordered him to pay restitution of \$942,141.

Thomas pleaded [pleaded guilty](#) before Judge Williams on June 28, 2022, to an information charging her with one count of bank fraud conspiracy and one count of money laundering and is scheduled to be sentenced on Dec. 16, 2022.

U.S. Attorney Sellinger credited special agents of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation – Office of Inspector General, under the direction of Patricia Tarasca, Special Agent-in-Charge, New York Regional Office, special agents of the Social Security Administration, Office of the Inspector General, New York Field Division, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Sharon MacDermott; special agents of the FBI’s South Jersey Resident Agency, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jacqueline Maguire in Philadelphia, special agents of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, New York Region, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone, with the investigation leading to today’s sentencing.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel A. Friedman and Jason M. Richardson, Attorney in Charge of the U.S. Attorney’s Office’s Criminal Division in Camden.

**Topic(s):**

Coronavirus

**Component(s):**

[USAO - New Jersey](#)

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