

PRESS RELEASE

Carnation, Washington, man sentenced to prison for COVID fraud scheme and attempts to steal from deceased Seattle victim

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For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Washington

Persistently tried to fool real estate, bank, and brokerage representatives to gain control of victim's estate

Seattle – A 36-year-old Carnation, Washington, man was sentenced today in U.S. District Court in Seattle to three years in prison for wire fraud, access device fraud, and aggravated identity theft for his two distinct fraud schemes to steal pandemic unemployment benefits and steal the home, bank assets, and stock portfolio of a deceased Seattle victim. Tyler Lee Berens pleaded guilty in July 2026. At today's sentencing hearing, U.S. District Judge John H. Chun noted these were "addiction-fueled" crimes that were nonetheless serious and had wide-reaching ramifications on the government and the victim.

Berens conducted two fraud schemes between 2020 and 2024. Beginning in May 2020, Berens submitted false claims for pandemic unemployment benefits in 19 different states: Montana, New Jersey, Nevada, Kansas, South Dakota, California, Arizona, Utah, Vermont, Alabama, Washington, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Idaho, Indiana, Delaware, and Colorado. He received a total of \$148,206 from six of those states - Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nevada, Rhode Island, and Washington. Berens also applied for and was approved for a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan of \$17,500. His PPP application was false, and no loan funds were paid out.

Two years later, Berens launched a second fraud scheme to steal the Seattle home, bank accounts, and stock portfolio of a deceased elderly victim by posing as the victim's authorized agent, impersonating the victim, and using the victim's personal information.

Berens made multiple attempts to steal a total of over half a million dollars' worth of the victim's assets.

Berens sent a real estate agent a forged power of attorney document and represented that he had the victim's authorization to sell the victim's home. Berens had even accepted an offer for the home, but fortunately the victim's niece was alerted, stepped in, and reported the attempted fraud.

Berens was not deterred once caught in the real estate fraud. He accessed the victim's bank accounts to try to transfer money from them and obtained a debit card for the victim's checking account. After fraud restrictions were placed on the accounts, Berens attempted to get them removed by impersonating the deceased victim via email.

Finally, Berens took over the victim's brokerage accounts and attempted to transfer money to himself and tried to liquidate over \$235,000 worth of stocks. When, once again, fraud restrictions stopped the attempted transactions and cut off his access, Berens impersonated the deceased victim and tried to regain control of the accounts.

Berens was indicted in August 2025, and pleaded guilty to wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, and access device fraud on July 2, 2026.

In asking for the three-year prison sentence, prosecutors wrote to the court, "The \$148,206.00 that went into Berens' pocket was money siphoned away from people and businesses in desperate need of assistance during the pandemic. He deliberately exploited vulnerabilities in the government's controls during an unprecedented and devastating period for his personal gain. As a result of his and similar schemes, the government continues to expend an inordinate amount of resources investigating and prosecuting COVID-19-related fraud."

"For years, Mr. Berens sought to profit through a variety of schemes, taking advantage of pandemic-era assistance programs to receive benefits to which he was not entitled from six states, and also impersonating a deceased person to steal their assets," said W. Mike Herrington, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI Seattle field office. "The FBI and our partners will carefully follow the money to pursue those who steal funds, and identities, that rightfully belong to others."

"Today's sentencing demonstrates our commitment to holding accountable those who exploit vulnerable individuals and abuse federal programs, ensuring they face the consequences they deserve. Fraud is not a victimless crime, and my office will continue to pursue justice for those exploited and uphold the integrity of our financial and social systems," said Anthony P. D'Esposito, Inspector General, U.S. Department of Labor.

Berens will be on three years of supervised release following prison and was ordered to pay \$148,706 in restitution.

On April 7, the Department of Justice announced the creation of the National Fraud Enforcement Division ("Fraud Division"). The Fraud Division is laser-focused on investigating and prosecuting those who commit fraud against the American people. The Department's work to combat fraud supports President Trump's Task Force to Eliminate Fraud, a whole-of-government effort chaired by Vice President J.D. Vance to eliminate fraud, waste, and abuse within Federal benefit programs.

The case was investigated by the FBI, the Social Security Administration Office of Inspector General (SSA-OIG), and the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG).

The case is being prosecuted by Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Jessica M. Ly.

Contact

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