

PRESS RELEASE

Chickaloon man sentenced to prison for COVID-19 fraud conspiracy

Wednesday, June 10, 2026

For Immediate Release

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

This case is part of the U.S. Department of Justice's National Fraud Enforcement Division.

ANCHORAGE, Alaska – A Chickaloon man was sentenced yesterday to two years in prison for orchestrating a scheme to defraud the U.S. government of COVID-19 relief funds.

According to court documents, Christopher Staggs, aka "Chrisopher Blackburn," 44, fraudulently obtained over \$170,000 through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The CARES and ARPA Acts included the Paycheck Protection Loan Program (PPP) and the temporary Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, which provided temporary benefits to individuals who lost work because of the pandemic. Staggs defrauded both programs during the criminal scheme and related offense conduct.

Shortly following the passing of the CARES Act in 2020, Staggs began using his Chicago-based LLC, "ABN Circle," as a front to file false and fraudulent unemployment insurance applications in Alaska and other states. Staggs harvested personally identifiable information (PII) from individuals who were either completely unaware or believed Staggs was assisting them in applying for unemployment benefits.

Staggs would receive the payments for each individual's unemployment insurance. Staggs then paid some of these individuals a fraction of the unlawful proceeds he received in their name, while others had their identity stolen and received no proceeds. Staggs then split the remaining proceeds between him and his co-conspirators.

The investigation revealed a spreadsheet that laid out the scheme in detail; including the names used to file the false applications; his victims' social security numbers; usernames and passwords associated with accounts used to file the false applications; and the total amount of laundered proceeds. Law enforcement also discovered detailed emails he

sent to his co-conspirators explaining both the spreadsheet and the nature of the scheme.



On July 18, 2024, Staggs and co-defendant Zeb Bewak, 42, of Anchorage, were indicted by a federal grand jury on one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud. Staggs was also indicted on eight counts of wire fraud, and Bewak was also indicted on even counts of wire fraud. On Feb. 18, 2026, Staggs pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud, and on March 6, 2025, Bewak pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud. Bewak is scheduled to be sentenced on June 15, 2026.

At sentencing, the Court also ordered Staggs to serve three years on supervised release following completion of his prison sentence. The Court ordered restitution to be determined at a later date.

“For years, Mr. Staggs used his intelligence to defraud people and systems, as well as avoid accountability. He saw the global pandemic as an avenue to continue that thirst, facilitating a grubby scheme upon the government that also victimized the very people the victim-programs were intended to assist,” said U.S. Attorney Michael J. Heyman for the District of Alaska. “This kind of manipulation is unacceptable. My office is committed to using every available resource, like the Justice Department’s National Fraud Enforcement Division, to neutralize threats to the American purse.”

“In the wake of a global health crisis, Mr. Staggs and his co-conspirators selfishly exploited taxpayer-funded programs to line their own pockets, diverting resources away from those in need,” said Special Agent in Charge Matthew Schlegel of the FBI Anchorage Field Office. “Together with our partners, the FBI will aggressively investigate and hold accountable anyone who seeks to abuse government programs for personal gain.”

The FBI Anchorage Field Office investigated the case, with assistance from the State of Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Adam Alexander prosecuted the case.

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.

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