

PRESS RELEASE

Forrest County Siblings Sentenced in Federal Court for COVID Relief Fraud

Monday, June 16, 2025

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Mississippi

Hattiesburg, MS – A Forrest County man and woman were sentenced today in federal court for their role in an unemployment insurance fraud scheme related to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Thaddieus Cooper, 31, was sentenced to 27 months in prison. Artista Garner, 37, was sentenced to probation for a term of three years. Both were ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$12,600 to the Mississippi Department of Employment Security.

According to court documents and statements made in court, Garner, 37, of Hattiesburg, assisted her brother, Cooper, 31, in applying for unemployment insurance benefits with the Mississippi Department of Employment Security. As an inmate in the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC), Cooper was not entitled to receive unemployment insurance benefits. Cooper was serving a sentence of six years in MDOC custody for armed robbery. Garner used the unemployment funds for her personal benefit and transferred some of the funds to Cooper via his commissary fund.

The unemployment insurance benefits were federally subsidized through the CARES Act in response to the pandemic.

A federal grand jury returned an indictment against Cooper and Garner on September 10, 2024. Both Cooper and Garner pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud on January 30, 2025.

“These sentences demonstrate that those who defraud the government will be held accountable,” said Acting United States Attorney Patrick Lemon. “These defendants took advantage of a program developed to help families facing difficult times. The United States Attorney’s Office remains committed to working with our law enforcement partners to uncover and prosecute pandemic-related fraud wherever it occurs.”

"Artista Garner engaged in a scheme to defraud the Mississippi Department of Employment Security by filing for unemployment insurance benefits on behalf of co-defendant, Thaddieus Cooper. Cooper was incarcerated that the time and thus ineligible for unemployment benefits. Garner and Cooper stole taxpayer funds from a program intended to assist American workers who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic," stated Mathew Broadhurst, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Southeast Region, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General. "We will continue to work closely with the U.S. Attorney's Office and our other law enforcement partners to protect the integrity of U.S. Department of Labor programs."

"The dedicated team at the State Auditor's office is proud to work with federal prosecutors to deliver record results for taxpayers," said State Auditor Shad White. "Thank you to my team of investigators and to the prosecutors for bringing this case to a close."

The U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General and the Mississippi Office of the State Auditor investigated the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kimberly Purdie prosecuted the case.

This case was prosecuted as part of the Department of Justice's National Unemployment Insurance Fraud Task Force (NUIFTF). In response to the unprecedented scope of Unemployment Insurance (UI) fraud, the Department of Justice established the NUIFTF. The NUIFTF is a prosecutor-led multi-agency task force with representatives from FBI, DOL-OIG, IRS-CI, HSI, DHS-OIG, USPIS, USSS, SSA-OIG, FDIC-OIG, and other agencies. Members of the NUIFTF are working with state workforce agencies, financial institutions, and other law enforcement partners across the country to fight UI fraud, and consumers should be vigilant in light of these threats and take the appropriate steps to safeguard themselves.

The CARES Act is a federal law enacted on March 29, 2020, designed to provide emergency financial assistance to the millions of Americans who are suffering the economic effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One source of relief provided by the CARES Act is the authorization that expands states' ability to provide unemployment insurance for many workers impacted by COVID-19, including for workers who are not ordinarily eligible for unemployment insurance benefits.

Anyone with information about attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice's National Center for Disaster Fraud Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

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