

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Massachusetts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, July 15, 2021

Lawrence Woman Pleads Guilty to Identity Theft and Unemployment Fraud Related to COVID-19 Pandemic

BOSTON – A Lawrence woman pleaded guilty today in connection with her involvement in a scheme to fraudulently obtain COVID-19-related unemployment assistance.

Raquel Pena, 40, pleaded guilty to wire fraud, conspiracy to commit wire fraud and aggravated identity theft. U.S. District Court Judge William G. Young scheduled sentencing for Nov. 4, 2021. Pena was charged by criminal complaint on April 1, 2021.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) created a temporary federal unemployment insurance program called Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). PUA, administered by the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, provides unemployment insurance benefits for individuals who are not eligible for other types of unemployment benefits (e.g., the self-employed, independent contractors or gig economy workers). Pena and others conspired to file fraudulent claims for PUA using others' personally identifiable information. Pena recruited acquaintances to receive the proceeds of the fraudulent claims into their bank accounts, withdraw all or a portion of those funds and give the cash to Pena. The investigation connected Pena and her co-conspirators to more than \$360,000 in unemployment claims between May 2020 and March 2021.

The charges of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and wire fraud each provide for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000. The charge of aggravated identity theft provides for a mandatory sentence of two years in prison to be served consecutively to any other sentenced imposed, one year of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Acting United States Attorney Nathaniel R. Mendell; Joseph R. Bonavolanta, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Division; and Michael Mikulka, Special Agent in Charge of Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Office of Investigations made the announcement today. The Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance provided assistance in the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Markham of Mendell's Securities, Financial & Cyber Fraud Unit is prosecuting the case.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by, among other methods, augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement efforts. For more information on the Department's response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

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

Topic(s):

Coronavirus
Financial Fraud
Identity Theft

Component(s):

[USAO - Massachusetts](#)