

PRESS RELEASE

Leader of an International Romance Scam Conspiracy Sentenced to More Than Ten Years in Federal Prison

Tuesday, October 8, 2024

For Immediate Release

District of Rhode Island

PROVIDENCE, RI – An Atlanta man described in court documents as an “unrepentant con man” who played a leading role in a romance scam and money laundering conspiracy involving perpetrators from across the United States and overseas locations including Nigeria, that targeted and bilked elder widows and divorcees in Rhode Island and elsewhere out of millions of dollars was sentenced today to more than ten years in federal prison, announced United States Attorney Zachary A. Cunha.

Wisdom Oghenekaro Onyobeno, 44, and others, created false personas and utilized a variety of online apps and games, such as Words with Friends, or dating applications to befriend and target potential victims. Onyobeno and his co-conspirators would then use fraudulent representations and emotional appeals to gain their victims’ trust, in order to convince those victims to send money to help with a purported personal crisis or urgent financial situation.

In some instances, conspirators falsely claimed to be military members stationed overseas, who needed funds to send their belongings home or to travel back to the U.S.; in other cases, they claimed to be U.S. contractors stuck on oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. Victims were instructed to mail checks, money orders, or cashier’s checks to post office boxes or to wire money to bank accounts managed by members of the conspiracy, including Onyobeno himself. In many cases, victims were convinced to send more money, on multiple occasions, based on conspirators’ made-up claims of unexpected and urgent circumstances. In yet other instances, conspirators would pose as government officials and tell victims that additional money was needed to deliver parcels that had been sent from overseas.

Once these funds were sent by victims, the conspirators laundered the funds to conceal their origin. As part of the money laundering conspiracy, Onyobeno and others created

business entities and bank accounts into which ill-gotten victim funds were deposited, and later withdrawn. According to information presented to the court, victims are known to have lost more than \$5.8 million dollars to members of this conspiracy.

“To those who believe that they can help themselves to the hard-earned savings of Rhode Islanders through deception and fraud, wherever you are, know that we will find you and bring you to justice,” said U.S. Attorney Zachary A. Cunha. “And to members of the public– I implore you- be skeptical of requests for funds from anyone you don’t know well, and take steps to protect yourself.”

“Wisdom Onyobeno preyed on the vulnerable causing not only significant financial losses but unmeasurable emotional damage,” said Ketty D. Larco-Ward, Inspector in Charge, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Boston Division. “Postal Inspectors, working with our partners, will continue to target these predators and bring them to justice.”

Onyobeno pleaded guilty on April 28, 2023, to charges of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and money laundering, and wire fraud. He was sentenced today by U.S. District Court Chief Judge John J. McConnell, Jr., to 121 months of incarceration to be followed by three years of federal supervised release. Restitution will be determined by the court at a later date.

A co-defendant in this matter, Dominique Golden, [is currently serving a term of incarceration of 78 months in federal prison.](#)

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Denise M. Barton and John P. McAdams.

The matter was investigated by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, with the assistance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Labor-Office of Inspector General, and U.S. Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration in Atlanta.

If you or someone you know is age 60 or older and has been a victim of financial fraud, help is available by calling the National Elder Fraud Hotline: 1-833 FRAUD-11 (1-833-372-8311). This Department of Justice Hotline, managed by the Office for Victims of Crime, is staffed by experienced professional who provide personalized support to callers by assessing the needs of the victim and identifying next steps. Case managers will identify appropriate reporting agencies, provide information to callers to assist them in reporting or connect them with agencies, and provide resources and referrals on a case-by-case basis. The hotline is staffed seven days a week from 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.[ET]. English, Spanish, and other languages are available. More information about

the Department's elder justice efforts can be found on the Department's Elder Justice website, <http://www.elderjustice.gov>.

###

Contact

Jim Martin

(401) 709-5357

Updated October 8, 2024

Topic

ELDER JUSTICE

Component

[USAO - Rhode Island](#)

Press Release Number: 24-113