

PRESS RELEASE

Maryland and Virginia Men Facing Federal Charges for Fraudulently Obtaining More Than \$550,000 in COVID-19 Cares Act Unemployment Insurance Benefits Using the Personal Information of Identity Theft Victims

Thursday, September 14, 2023

For Immediate Release

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

Baltimore, Maryland – A federal grand jury has returned a superseding indictment charging Michael Cooley, Jr., a/k/a "Micheal Cooley Jr.," "5Micmusik," and "Michael White," age 24, and Isiah Lewis, a/k/a "Zay," age 33, both of Maryland; and "Alonzo Brown, age 26, of Virginia, for conspiracy to commit wire fraud and aggravated identity theft, relating to the submission of fraudulent claims for unemployment insurance ("UI") benefits under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ("CARES") Act, enacted to provide emergency financial assistance to Americans suffering from the economic effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The superseding indictment was filed July 19, 2023, and unsealed today upon the arrest of the defendants.

Lewis is expected to have an initial appearance in U.S. District Court in Greenbelt at 2:30 p.m. Cooley and Brown are expected to have their initial appearances in U.S. District Court in Atlanta, Georgia this afternoon as well.

The superseding indictment was announced by United States Attorney for the District of Maryland Erik L. Barron; Acting Special Agent in Charge Troy W. Springer of the National Capital Region of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Inspector General

("DOL-OIG"); and Special Agent in Charge Kareem A. Carter of the Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigation, Washington, D.C. Field Office.

Financial assistance offered through the CARES Act included expanded eligibility for UI benefits and increased UI benefits through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program ("PUA"), Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation ("FPUC"), and the Lost Wages Assistance Program ("LWAP").

According to the superseding indictment from at least June 2020 through March 2021, the defendants used the personal identifiable information of identity theft victims, such as name, date of birth, and social security number, to file online UI applications in Maryland and California, using anonymous email addresses to obscure their identities and avoid detection. Cooley, Lewis, Brown and others allegedly caused debit cards bearing the names of identity theft victims and loaded with UI benefits from fraudulent UI claims to be mailed to addresses in Maryland and elsewhere. The defendants then used the benefits to obtain money and engage in point-of-sale transactions. Cooley, Lewis and Brown obtained more than \$550,000 through the fraud scheme.

If convicted, the defendants each face a maximum sentence of 20 years in federal prison for each count of wire fraud and a mandatory sentence of two years in federal prison, consecutive to any other sentence imposed, for aggravated identity theft. Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after taking into account the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

A superseding indictment is not a finding of guilt. An individual charged by superseding indictment is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty at some later criminal proceedings.

The District of Maryland Strike Force is one of five strike forces established throughout the United States by the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate and prosecute COVID-19 fraud, including fraud relating to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ("CARES") Act. The CARES Act was designed to provide emergency financial assistance to Americans suffering the economic effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strike forces focus on large-scale, multi-state pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors. The strike forces are interagency law enforcement efforts, using prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams designed to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds.

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>.

United States Attorney Erek L. Barron commended the DOL-OIG and IRS-CI for their work in the investigation. Mr. Barron thanked Assistant U.S. Attorneys Bijon A. Mostoufi and Darryl Tarver, who are prosecuting the case. He also recognized the assistance of the Maryland COVID-19 Strike Force Paralegal Specialist Joanna B.N. Huber.

For more information on the Maryland U.S. Attorney's Office, its priorities, and resources available to help the community, please visit www.justice.gov/usao/md.

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