

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

Menifee Woman Pleads Guilty to Federal Criminal Charge for Fraudulently Obtaining Over \$500,000 in COVID-19 Jobless Relief

LOS ANGELES – A Riverside County woman pleaded guilty today to a federal criminal charge for fraudulently obtaining more than \$500,000 in COVID-related unemployment benefits for herself.

Cara Marie Kirk-Connell, 32, of Menifee, pleaded guilty to a single-count information charging her with use of an unauthorized access device.

According to her plea agreement, from May to October 2020, Kirk-Connell knowingly used approximately 50 unauthorized access devices. Specifically, she used stolen personal identifiable information, such as dates of birth and Social Security numbers, to apply for unemployment insurance benefits in the names of other people.

Based upon Kirk-Connell's false and fraudulent applications, she obtained from the California Employment Development Department (EDD) multiple debit cards that contained more than \$500,000 in COVID-related unemployment benefits to which she was not entitled, the plea agreement states.

Kirk-Connell admitted she knew people who access the "dark web" to purchase stolen identities that she used to then file fraudulent claims with EDD. She further admitted to watching YouTube videos that instructed viewers on how to commit EDD fraud.

When Murietta police arrested Kirk-Connell on September 11 during a traffic stop, she possessed eight EDD debit cards in other people's names and, the day before her arrest, Kirk-Connell used fraudulently obtained EDD debit cards to withdraw more than \$1,000 in cash. When federal law enforcement arrested Kirk-Connell on October 9, she possessed in her purse four EDD debit cards in victims' names, four additional debit cards in victims' names in her car trunk, and approximately \$10,000 in cash, according to the plea agreement.

EDD records showed that the cards and identities that Kirk-Connell possessed had been used to apply for and authorize approximately \$534,149 in COVID-related unemployment benefits from California's EDD program, of which nearly \$270,000 had already been spent, according to an affidavit filed with a criminal complaint in this case.

The California EDD distributes unemployment benefits under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, passed by Congress in March. The CARES Act expanded unemployment benefits to cover those who were previously ineligible, including business owners, self-employed workers, and independent contractors, who were put out of business or significantly reduced their services because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

United States District Judge André Birotte Jr. has scheduled an April 9, 2021 sentencing hearing, at which time Kirk-Connell will face a statutory maximum sentence of 10 years in federal prison.

This investigation, which is a result of the Department of Justice's National Unemployment Insurance Fraud Task Force, was conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, IRS Criminal Investigation, and the United States Postal Inspection Service. California EDD Criminal Investigations and the Murrieta Police Department provided substantial assistance.

Assistant United States Attorney Charles E. Pell of the Santa Ana Branch Office is prosecuting this case.

Topic(s):
Coronavirus

Component(s):
USAO - California, Central

Contact:
Ciaran McEvoy
Public Information Officer United States
Attorney's Office Central District of California
(Los Angeles) ciaran.mcevoy@usdoj.gov (213)
894-4465

Press Release Number:
20-246