

PRESS RELEASE

Middle District Of Florida Task Force Continues To Combat COVID-19 Fraud

Monday, July 22, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Florida

Tampa, FL – United States Attorney Roger B. Handberg announces the results achieved by the Middle District of Florida to combat fraud related to COVID-19. This work has included complementary efforts by the United States Attorney's Office's (USAO-MDFL) Criminal, Asset Recovery, Appellate, and Civil Divisions, along with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

"The Middle District of Florida United States Attorney's Office continues to pursue, investigate, prosecute, and recover money from those who were engaged in fraud schemes designed to steal benefits intended for Americans coping with the myriad impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic," said U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg.

On the criminal enforcement front, the USAO-MDFL and federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies combined resources in March 2020 to form the Middle District of Florida COVID-19 Fraud Task Force to identify, investigate, and prosecute fraud related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Since its inception through June 30, 2024, the Task Force has prosecuted 89 defendants for fraud schemes designed to exploit federal programs including the Paycheck Protection Program ("PPP"), Economic Injury Disaster Loans ("EIDL"), Unemployment Insurance ("UI"), the Main Street Lending Program ("MSLP"), the Emergency Rental Assistance Program ("ERAP"), as well as government Healthcare programs such as Medicare. Collectively, these defendants sought to defraud the United States of over \$84.5 million. Sixty-seven of those defendants have already been found guilty, while prosecution remains pending against 22 defendants. (See *chart for criminal case details*.)

For example, in April 2024, a federal jury found [Barrett Purvis](#) guilty of wire fraud and money laundering. According to court records, Purvis applied for and received a \$500,000 EIDL in May 2021. Although he applied on behalf of a legitimate small business he owned and operated, Purvis never intended to use any of the loan proceeds on working capital as required by the terms of the loan agreement. Instead, Purvis spent approximately half of the proceeds on gambling debt and the rest on other personal debt, including debt incurred on his girlfriend's three credit cards. Within two weeks of receiving the loan, Purvis had used nearly all the proceeds on personal expenses, unrelated to any legitimate business.

Additionally, in June 2024, [Evan Graves](#) was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison and ordered to forfeit approximately \$1.35 million and five Fort Myers properties he purchased using his fraudulently obtained EIDL. According to court records, between June 20 and July 23, 2020, Graves submitted 10 EIDL applications to the SBA on behalf of his various Fort Myers-based companies. To qualify for large loan amounts and advance funding, Graves falsely represented his companies' number of employees, gross revenue, and lost rental income due to the COVID-19 disaster. In total, Graves's fraudulent representations caused the SBA to approve all 10 loans and deposit

approximately \$1.35 million into bank accounts he controlled. Following disbursement of the EIDL funding, Graves unlawfully used the money to pay off personal credit card debt, fund personal investment accounts, satisfy mortgages, and purchase real estate.

Further, the USAO-MDFL's Asset Recovery Division and federal seizing agencies have completed the forfeiture of more than \$20 million of EIDL, UI, and PPP funds that were fraudulently obtained, depriving the fraudsters of their ill-gotten gains and recovering the proceeds for the victims. More than \$18 million in additional pandemic fraud proceeds have been seized and are pending civil or criminal forfeiture.

The U.S. Attorney General has 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. For more information on the department's response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

Through the PPP, the federal government authorized over \$600 billion in forgivable loans to small businesses for job retention and certain other expenses through the PPP. The EIDL program provides economic relief to small businesses that are currently experiencing a temporary loss of revenue. The MSLP provided support to small and medium-sized businesses and their employees across the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. UI programs provided unemployment benefits to eligible workers who became unemployed through no fault of their own.

The criminal cases charged by the Middle District of Florida COVID-19 Fraud Task Force have been investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Secret Service, Internal Revenue Service—Criminal Investigation, the Department of Labor—Office of Inspector General, the U.S. Postal Service, the Federal Housing Finance Agency, the Small Business Administration, the Small Business Administration—Office of Inspector General, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation—Office of Inspector General, Homeland Security Investigations, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery, Federal Reserve Board—Office of Inspector General, Department of Health and Human Services—Office of Inspector General, the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation, the Tampa Police Department, the Orlando Police Department, the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, the Manatee County Sheriff's Office, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office, the Winter Park Police Department, the Osceola County Sheriff's Office, the Seminole County Sheriff's Office, and the Orange County Sheriff's Office. The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys throughout the Middle District of Florida.

The Department of Justice needs the public's assistance in remaining vigilant and reporting suspected fraudulent activity. To report suspected fraud, contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud ("NCDF") at (866) 720-5721 or file an online complaint at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/webform/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>. Complaints filed will be reviewed at the NCDF and referred to federal, state, local, or international law enforcement or regulatory agencies for investigation.