

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **Middlesex County Man Sentenced to 30 Months in Prison for Stealing COVID-19 Unemployment Benefits**

Tuesday, April 30, 2024

**For Immediate Release**

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of New Jersey

NEWARK N.J. – A Middlesex County, New Jersey, man was sentenced today to 30 months in prison for conspiring to illegally obtain over \$400,000 in COVID-19 unemployment benefits, U.S. Attorney Philip R. Sellinger announced.

Christopher Valerio, 33, of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, previously pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Robert Kirsch to an information charging him with one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud. Judge Kirsch imposed the sentence today in Newark federal court.

Valerio's conspirator, Yanira Abreu of Keasby, New Jersey, pleaded guilty on Sept. 12, 2023, on charges stemming from the same scheme and is scheduled to be sentenced on May 9, 2024. A third conspirator, Jose Tavares of New York, is charged by indictment and his case remains pending.

According to documents filed in this case and statements made in court:

From July 2020 through February 2021, Valerio, Abreu and others submitted false and fraudulent applications for unemployment insurance benefits to the New York Department of Labor (NYDOL) through fictitious online profiles that they created using personally identifiable information, including names, dates of birth, and Social Security numbers, of other individuals without their consent. Once the NYDOL processed and approved the fraudulent applications, Valerio and his conspirators obtained debit cards with illegally obtained funds totaling \$444,738, which they used for personal gain.

In addition to the prison term, Judge Kirsch sentenced Valerio to two years of supervised release and ordered restitution and forfeiture, each in the amount of \$444,728.

U.S. Attorney Sellinger credited special agents of Homeland Security Investigations Newark, under the direction of Acting Special Agent in Charge William S. Walker; special agents of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Northeast Region, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone, and postal inspectors of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service in Newark, under the direction of Inspector in Charge Christopher A. Nielsen, Philadelphia Division, with the investigation leading to today's sentencing.

The District of New Jersey COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement 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. 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.

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 Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Fatime Meka Cano of the Economic Crimes Unit in Newark.

The charges and allegations against Tavares are merely accusations, and Taveras is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

*Updated April 30, 2024*

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**Topic**

**CORONAVIRUS**

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