

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **New Jersey Man Sentenced To 40 Months In Prison For Stealing COVID-19 Unemployment Benefits; Others Previously Sentenced**

Friday, March 7, 2025

**For Immediate Release**

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

TRENTON, N.J. – A New Jersey man was sentenced to 40 months in prison for his role in a conspiracy to illegally obtain over \$570,000 in COVID-19 unemployment benefits, U.S. Attorney John Giordano announced.

Jose Tavares, 37, of Englewood, New Jersey, was convicted on Oct. 28, 2024, on one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud after a five-day jury trial before U.S. District Judge Robert Kirsch. Judge Kirsch imposed the sentence in Trenton federal court. Tavares' conspirators, Yanira Abreu, 43, of Keasbey, New Jersey, and Christopher Valerio, 34, of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, were each sentenced previously by Judge Kirsch in the same scheme.

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

From July 2020 through February 2021, Tavares, Valerio, Abreu and others submitted 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, Tavares and his conspirators obtained debit cards with the illegally obtained funds totaling over \$570,000, which they used for personal gain, including vacations, luxury retail purchases, and cosmetic surgery.

In addition to the prison term, Judge Kirsch sentenced Tavares to 3 years of supervised release and ordered Tavares to pay in \$570,077 in restitution.

U.S. Attorney Giordano credited special agents of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Homeland Security Investigations, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Ricky J. Patel in Newark; 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, under the direction of Postal Inspector in Charge Christopher A. Nielsen, Philadelphia Division, with the investigation that led to the sentencing.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Matthew Stark and Benjamin D. Bleiberg of the Economic Crimes Unit in Newark.

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>.

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Defense Counsel for Tavares: Jeffrey Simms, Esq. and Roberto Espinosa, Esq., of New Jersey.

Defense counsel for Valerio: Kevin Roe, Esq., of New Jersey.

Defense counsel for Abreu: John Russo, Esq., of New York.

[tavares.indictment.pdf](#)

*Updated March 7, 2025*

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**Topic**

**FINANCIAL FRAUD**

**Component**

[USAO - New Jersey](#)

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