

PRESS RELEASE

Nigerian Man Sentenced To Prison For Covid-19 Unemployment Insurance Benefits Scam

Thursday, February 22, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Tennessee

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. – On February 21, 2024, Valentine O. Odije, 35 years old, a Nigerian citizen currently residing in Georgia, was sentenced to 21 months in prison by the Honorable Thomas A. Varlan, in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee at Knoxville.

Odije pleaded guilty to conspiracy to use an unauthorized access device related to his and his coconspirators' unlawful use of debit cards funded with Covid-19 unemployment insurance ("UI") benefits in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1029(b)(2). Following his incarceration, he will be on supervised release for a period of three years. In addition, he was ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$661,082.19 and to forfeit \$86,651.68 in cash.

As set forth in the written plea agreement filed with the court, Odije was recruited into an ongoing scheme by individuals who were filing fraudulent UI benefits claims during the pandemic. The fraudulent claims resulted in UI benefits being loaded onto debit cards that Odije possessed. Odije's role in the scheme was to use those debit cards to withdraw cash and purchase money orders. Odije knew the debit cards were funded with unlawfully obtained UI benefits. Odije recruited others to help him access the UI benefits on the cards, selecting the cards for them to use and instructing them how to withdraw cash and purchase money orders.

On July 17, 2020, Odije and his coconspirators used four debit cards at a retail store in the Eastern District of Tennessee to collectively withdraw \$23,527.99 in UI benefits. When Odije and his coconspirators were arrested that day, Odije possessed

315 debit cards, 204 of which were funded with a total of \$661,082.19 in unlawfully obtained UI benefits.

Two of Odije's coconspirators, Dianne M. Coffie and Ayesha Shah, previously pleaded guilty in the Eastern District of Tennessee to conducting unlawful transactions with an access device. Coffie was sentenced to three years' probation and ordered to pay \$90,000 in restitution. Shah was sentenced to two years' probation and ordered to pay \$40,000 in restitution.

U.S. Attorney Francis M. Hamilton III of the Eastern District of Tennessee; Resident Agent in Charge, Jason Brown, of the United States Secret Service; and Special Agent in Charge, Matthew Broadhurst, of the United States Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, made the announcement.

This case is the result of an investigation conducted by the United States Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General.

William A. Roach, Jr., an Assistant United States Attorney who serves as the Eastern District of Tennessee's Coronavirus Fraud Coordinator, prosecuted the case.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General 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. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by, among other methods, augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement efforts. 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>.

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Updated February 22, 2024

Topic

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