

PRESS RELEASE

St. Joseph Woman Sentenced for Using Prison Inmates' Identities in Covid Fraud Scheme

Thursday, October 19, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Missouri

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – A St. Joseph, Mo., woman was sentenced in federal court today for using the stolen identities of prison inmates to fraudulently obtain federal unemployment benefits under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Brooke Stewart, 39, was sentenced by U.S. District Judge Brian C. Wimes to two years and six months in federal prison without parole. The court also ordered Stewart to pay \$139,663 in restitution to the Missouri Dept of Employment Security and a \$50 fine.

On May 18, 2023, Stewart pleaded guilty to one count of stealing government funds. Stewart admitted that she facilitated the filing of false claims for unemployment benefits by using the stolen identity information of five individuals who were incarcerated in state or federal prison and therefore not eligible to receive Missouri and enhanced unemployment benefits. Stewart also fraudulently received federal unemployment benefits in her own name and another person.

As a result of her fraud scheme, Stewart stole at least \$139,663 in benefits under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which provided additional federal pandemic unemployment compensation to eligible individuals receiving other unemployment benefits under state laws. These funds were intended to assist persons who were unemployed because of the pandemic.

None of the inmates whose identity information was stolen actually received any of the fraudulently obtained benefits. Among those individuals whose stolen identity information was used to obtain benefits from May 2020 to June 2021 were federal defendants Garland Nelson and Brooke Beckley. Nelson is serving a 32-year federal prison sentence for a cattle fraud scheme that led to two murders in Braymer, Mo., and for illegally possessing a firearm, as well as two life sentences in a separate state case for the murders. Beckley is serving a 40-year prison sentence for her role in the murder of a

Mexican national who was executed to help her avoid paying a debt owed in a drug-trafficking conspiracy in the Springfield, Mo., area.

Stewart was on supervision from a 2019 state court conviction for trafficking in stolen identities, which resulted in a 10-year suspended sentence, at the time of this federal offense. A revocation hearing has been ordered in that case.

This case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Paul S. Becker. It was investigated by the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General and the Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General – Office of Investigations & Labor Racketeering Fraud.

Updated October 19, 2023