

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of New Jersey

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, December 10, 2021

Three Individuals Charged with Stealing Unemployment Benefits

NEWARK, N.J. – A Middlesex County, New Jersey, man and woman and a New York man were arrested today and charged for their alleged roles in a fraud committed in connection with unemployment insurance benefits, Acting U.S. Attorney Rachael A. Honig announced.

Christopher Valerio, 31, of Woodbridge, New Jersey, Yanira Abreu, 40, of Keasbey, New Jersey, and Jose Tavares, 34, of New York, New York, are each charged by complaint with one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud. All three defendants are scheduled to appear by videoconference this afternoon before U.S. Magistrate District Judge Michael A. Hammer.

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

On March 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) was signed into law. The CARES Act created a new temporary federal unemployment insurance program called Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), which provides unemployment benefits for individuals who are not eligible for other types of unemployment, such as self-employed workers or independent contractors. The CARES Act also created a new temporary federal program called Federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance that provided an additional weekly benefit to those eligible for PUA and regular unemployment benefits.

From July 2020 through February 2021, the defendants and others fraudulently applied for unemployment insurance benefits from the New York Department of Labor (NYDOL) by unlawfully utilizing the personal identifying information of at least a dozen victims, including the victims' names, and Social Security numbers. Fictitious user profiles that the defendants created included mailing addresses that ostensibly belonged to the victims, but in fact were controlled by the defendants and others. Once the NYDOL processed and approved the fraudulent applications, a financial institution transferred the benefit funds to debit cards in the names associated with the fictitious user profiles and sent the debit cards to the addresses associated with the defendants. The defendants withdrew funds using the cards at various ATM locations throughout New Jersey and New York.

The wire fraud conspiracy charge carries a maximum potential penalty of 20 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000 or twice the gross profits or twice the gross loss suffered by the victims of his offense, whichever is greatest.

Acting U.S. Attorney Honig credited special agents of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Homeland Security Investigations, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jason J. Molina in Newark; special agents of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, New York Region, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone; and postal inspectors of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, New Jersey Division, under the direction of Acting Postal Inspector in Charge Raimundo Marrero, with the investigation leading to the charges.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Olajide A. Araromi and Fatime Cano of the Government Fraud Unit in Newark.

The charges and allegations contained in the complaint are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

Attachment(s):

[Download ValerioEtAl.Complaint.pdf](#)

Topic(s):

Financial Fraud

Component(s):

[USAO - New Jersey](#)

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