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Two Nigerian Nationals Based in Maryland Sentenced for Schemes to Steal California and Other States' Unemployment Insurance Benefits

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Nigerian nationals Quazeem Owolabi Adeyinka, 22, and Ayodeji Jonathan Sangode, 25, currently both residing in Maryland, were sentenced today to 26 months and 14 months in prison respectively for their roles a fraud conspiracy during the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Attorney Phillip A. Talbert announced.

Sangode pleaded guilty in October 2022 to access device fraud, and Adeyinka pleaded guilty in November 2022 to conspiracy to commit wire fraud. A third co-conspirator, Olamide Yusuf Bakare, 26, also pleaded guilty and was sentenced in July 2023 to four years and nine months in prison.

According to court documents, between June 2020 and July 2021, Adeyinka, Sangode, Bakare, and others participated in a conspiracy to submit fraudulent unemployment insurance (UI) and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) claims to the State of California. More than 200 individual applications were filed with the California Employment Development Department (EDD) indicating that the claimants' address was the Hyattsville, Maryland, apartment that the co-defendants shared.

During the conspiracy, the conspirators obtained the personally identifiable information (PII) of persons who were not eligible for UI or PUA benefits or who did not authorize the conspirators to act on their behalf with respect to seeking such benefits. Such PII included names, dates of birth, and Social Security numbers. The conspirators then used the PII to submit dozens of fraudulent UI and PUA claims to EDD under the putative claimants' identities and without their authorization.

The underlying benefit applications contained false representations, including, for example, that the claimants had worked for certain employers and supervisors; had specific annual incomes; worked during certain time periods; were self-employed in various occupations; were laid off

and had no work; were newly unemployed due to a disaster including the COVID-19 pandemic; and were currently available to work. Most, if not all, of these claims were false because the claimants were not so previously working, employed, newly unemployed, or seeking new employment.

The conspirators knew that these representations were false or lacked the knowledge and authority to make such representations. These actions caused EDD to approve fraudulent UI and PUA claims.

For each approved claim, EDD deposited benefit funds into a debit card account administered by Bank of America and under the identity of the putative claimant. Bank of America then mailed unauthorized debit cards to addresses under the control of the defendants. Under the direction of Bakare and others, Adeyinka and Sangode then obtained these debit cards and their PINs and used these cards to withdraw cash at ATMs for the benefit of themselves and coconspirators.

At least 15 debit cards that Adeyinka used during the conspiracy were linked to bank accounts that received approximately \$237,911 in fraudulent UI and PUA benefits. Adeyinka was personally involved in \$793,844 in attempted loss. And at least 53 debit cards that Sangode used during the conspiracy were linked to bank accounts that received approximately \$752,142 in fraudulent UI and PUA benefits.

This case was the product of an investigation by the Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Homeland Security – Office of Inspector General – Covid Fraud Unit, and the California EDD – Investigation Division. Assistant U.S. Attorney Denise N. Yasinow prosecuted the case.

This effort is part of a California COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Strike Force operation, one of five interagency COVID-19 fraud strike force teams established by the U.S. Department of Justice. The California Strike Force combines law enforcement and prosecutorial resources in the Eastern and Central Districts of California and focuses on large-scale, multistate pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors. The strike forces use prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds.

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