

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Western District of Pennsylvania

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Two SCI Inmates, Two Allegheny County Residents Charged in Schemes to Smuggle Synthetic Cannabinoids into State Prisons and to Obtain Pandemic Unemployment Benefits

PITTSBURGH, PA - Two residents of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, and two individuals incarcerated at Pennsylvania State Correctional Institutions (SCIs), have been indicted by a federal grand jury in Pittsburgh on charges of shipping drugs into a prison and pandemic unemployment fraud, Acting United States Attorney Stephen R. Kaufman announced today.

The three-count drug-related Indictment, returned on July 20, 2021 and unsealed today, named Rodney Howard, 36, who is currently incarcerated at SCI Mahanoy; Dustin Hill, 34, who is currently incarcerated at SCI Benner; and DeAndre Jackson, 28, of Skyline Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15227.

The one-count pandemic unemployment fraud-related Indictment, also returned on July 20, 2021 and unsealed today, named DeAndre Jackson, 28, of Skyline Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15227, Rodneka Howard, 27, of Greensburg Pike, North Versailles, PA 15137; and Rodney Howard, 36, who is currently incarcerated at SCI Mahanoy. Rodney and Rodneka Howard are siblings with each other and half-siblings with DeAndre Jackson.

Acting U.S. Attorney Kaufman said, "Introducing illicit drugs into the prison system endangers inmates and employees. Illegally obtaining pandemic unemployment benefits hurts real Pennsylvania workers struggling to cope with job loss. Both types of crimes violate federal law and will be swiftly and justly prosecuted."

"The PA Department of Corrections maintains a zero tolerance policy toward individuals who engage in criminal activity while housed in our facilities, particularly those who put staff and others at risk by attempting to smuggle dangerous drugs into prisons," said PA Department of Corrections (PADOC) Secretary John Wetzell. "The charges announced today are the result of months of exemplary work from members the PADOC's Bureau of Investigations and Intelligence, the DOJ, and our other state and federal law enforcement partners, and I applaud them for their efforts."

Inspector in Charge Lesley Allison, Pittsburgh Division said, "Postal Inspectors, federal prosecutors and our law enforcement partners have diligently worked to identify and disrupt the activities of drug trafficking and mail fraud. Postal Inspectors will continue to tirelessly investigate these types of crimes that utilize the U.S. Postal Service to facilitate illicit transactions."

"An important part of the mission of the Office of Inspector General is to investigate allegations of fraud related to unemployment insurance programs. We will continue to work with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry and our law enforcement partners to investigate these types of allegations", stated Syreeta Scott, Acting Special Agent-in-Charge of the Philadelphia Region, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General.

According to the drug-related indictment, Rodney Howard, Hill, and Jackson conspired to distribute and possess with intent to distribute ADB-BUTINACA, which is a Schedule I controlled substance. The indictment also charges Jackson with distributing that drug and with using the mails to aid this unlawful activity.

According to the pandemic unemployment fraud-related indictment, Jackson, Rodneka Howard, and Rodney Howard conspired to commit mail fraud by applying for or causing applications for pandemic benefits on behalf of three incarcerated individuals who were ineligible for those benefits. One of those cards was mailed to Rodneka Howard's home address and another was mailed to an address that Jackson has used as his shipping and billing address in other contexts.

According to affidavits filed in support of search warrants that have been unsealed, on January 29, 2021, a manilla envelope was mailed from a post office in Pittsburgh to Hill at SCI Dallas with a return address at the Court of Common Pleas in Pittsburgh. The package contained approximately 30 sheets of cotton fiber paper that appeared to be a docket for a criminal case against Dustin Hill in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas. Later lab testing concluded that the sheets had been soaked in a synthetic cannabinoid named ADB-BUTINACA.

Postage for that envelope was paid using a pandemic unemployment benefits card in the name of inmate Z.E. who was on the same cell block at SCI Dallas as Rodney Howard and Hill.

In early February 2021, the envelope arrived at SCI Dallas and was treated as legal mail. Under the protocols at that time, the envelope was delivered to Hill by multiple corrections officers who opened it in front of Hill. The officers realized that the envelope's content had been soaked in suspected synthetic cannabinoids, so they took the envelope to the Security Office for further inspection. At the Security Office, two corrections officers became ill from exposure to the envelope's contents.

The sheets of paper in the envelope were altered to look like Hill had a criminal case in Allegheny County, so the package would appear to be legitimate legal mail shipped from Pittsburgh. But Hill has no criminal cases in Allegheny County.

Additionally, the affidavits describe recorded jail calls and photos of handwritten notes in DeAndre Jackson's phone that further connect Rodney Howard, Jackson, and Hill to the envelope and the drug-soaked sheets inside. For example, Jackson's personal credit card was used to make payments to Hill, consistent with jail calls between Rodney Howard and Jackson, as well as consistent with a photo of a handwritten note in Jackson's phone.

As explained in the affidavits, there is a market in prison for sheets of paper soaked in synthetic cannabinoids. An inmate will generally cut such a sheet into small pieces to sell to other inmates who ingest the paper for the psychedelic effects. It is common to soak the synthetic cannabinoids in parchment paper because the thicker cotton paper is absorbent. Such contraband is typically introduced into state prisons under the guise of legal mail, which may be addressed to a different inmate to avoid detection if the mail is intercepted. During the coronavirus pandemic, the prices for these sheets of drug-soaked paper have increased dramatically. Although the prices fluctuate, at relevant times, a full sheet of paper with synthetic cannabinoids could sell in an SCI, once divided into separate pieces, for a total of approximately \$8,000, \$10,000 or \$14,000. Jackson's emails include notifications for hundreds of Cash App transactions, including transactions that indicate they are on behalf of individuals at "SCI Dallas" or "in the Dallas prison."

The pandemic benefit card that Jackson was using is connected to two other pandemic benefits cards in the names of incarcerated individuals, including Rodney Howard. The Rodney Howard card was shipped to Rodneka Howard's home address in North Versailles, and she used this card to make purchases. Another of the cards was shipped to the Amato Drive address in North Versailles that Jackson has used, and there is evidence of Jackson using that card.

For the drug charges, the law provides for a maximum total sentence of 20 years in prison, a fine of \$1,000,000, or both. For the mail fraud conspiracy, the law provides for a maximum total sentence of 20 years in prison, a fine of \$250,000, or both. Under the Federal Sentencing Guidelines, the actual sentence imposed would be based upon the seriousness of the offenses and the prior criminal history, if any, of the defendant.

Assistant United States Attorney Ira M. Karoll is prosecuting this case on behalf of the government.

The United States Postal Inspection Service, Pennsylvania Department of Corrections- Bureau of Investigations and Intelligence, and United States Department of Labor-Office of Inspector General conducted the investigation leading to the Indictments in this case, with assistance from the United States Drug Enforcement Administration and Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry— Internal Audits Division.

An indictment is an accusation. A defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

Topic(s):

Coronavirus

Drug Trafficking

Component(s):

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