

PRESS RELEASE

Watervliet Woman Charged with Pandemic Fraud

Monday, July 1, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of New York

ALBANY, NEW YORK – Elizabeth Lashley, a/k/a “Elizabeth Bonilla,” age 42, of Watervliet, New York, has been indicted on wire fraud charges for fraudulently obtaining pandemic-related unemployment insurance benefits in multiple states.

United States Attorney Carla B. Freedman; Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent in Charge, Northeast Region, United States Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General (USDOL-OIG); Ketty Larco-Ward, Inspector in Charge of the Boston Division of the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS); and Matthew Scarpino, Special Agent in Charge of the Buffalo Field Office of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), made the announcement.

Lashley was arraigned in federal court today on an indictment alleging that from about May 2020 to July 2020, she fraudulently obtained unemployment insurance benefits worth more than \$65,000 by submitting applications for benefits in her own name or an alias with the state workforce agencies of California, Arizona, and Massachusetts. The charges in the indictment are merely accusations. The defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

The wire fraud charges carry a maximum term of 20 years in prison, a fine of up to \$250,000, and a term of supervised release of up to 3 years. A defendant’s sentence is imposed by a judge based on the particular statute the defendant is charged with violating, the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other factors.

The case is being investigated by USDOL-OIG, USPIS, and HSI, with assistance from the Albany Police Department. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Matthew M. Paulbeck, Joseph S. Hartunian, and Joshua R. Rosenthal are prosecuting 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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