

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Rapper Who Boasted in Music Video About Committing COVID Fraud Sentenced to Over 6 Years in Prison on Fraud, Gun and Drug Crimes

LOS ANGELES – A rapper who boasted in a YouTube music video about getting rich quickly by scamming a COVID relief program was sentenced today to 77 months in federal prison.

Fontrell Antonio Baines, 33, a.k.a. “Nuke Bizzle,” of Memphis, Tennessee, was sentenced by United States District Judge Michael W. Fitzgerald, who also ordered him to pay \$704,760 in restitution to the California Employment Development Department (EDD).

Today’s sentence was imposed in connection with three criminal cases. Baines pleaded guilty on July 11 to one count of mail fraud and, in a separate case, to one count of unlawful possession of a firearm and ammunition by a convicted felon. He also pleaded guilty on August 30 to possession of oxycodone with intent to distribute in a case transferred from the Western District of Tennessee. Baines has been in federal custody since his arrest in October 2020.

From July 2020 to September 2020, Baines unlawfully exploited the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) provisions of the CARES Act to obtain unemployment insurance money – ultimately more than \$700,000 – to which he was not entitled.

As the COVID-19 pandemic’s grip tightened, Congress implemented the PUA provisions to expand access to unemployment benefits to self-employed workers, independent contractors, and others who would not otherwise be eligible for them.

Baines defrauded the program to obtain unemployment benefits administered by the EDD in the names of third parties, including identity theft victims. The applications for benefits also included false statements about the work histories and in-state residences of the named applicants. Through his fraud, Baines turned the taxpayer-funded program into “his personal piggybank,” according to a sentencing memorandum filed by federal prosecutors.

The applications for these benefits listed addresses in Beverly Hills and Koreatown to which Baines had access. As a result, Baines was able to take possession of and use the debit cards that EDD pre-loaded with the unemployment benefits obtained through the fraudulent applications.

For example, Baines used the identity of a Missouri man who briefly attended school – but never worked – in California to apply for unemployment benefits. In September 2020, Baines used a debit card issued based on the fraudulent PUA claim filed in the Missouri man’s name to withdraw approximately \$2,500.

Baines filed 92 fraudulent PUA claims with EDD, resulting in attempted losses to EDD and the United States Treasury of approximately \$1,256,108 and actual losses of at least \$704,760.

According to court documents, Baines bragged about his ability to defraud the EDD in a music video posted on YouTube and in postings to his Instagram account. In the music video called “EDD,”

Baines boasts about doing “my swagger for EDD” and, holding up a stack of envelopes from EDD, getting rich by “go[ing] to the bank with a stack of these” – an apparent reference to the debit cards that came in the mail.

In addition, in October 2020 at his Hollywood Hills residence, Baines illegally possessed a semi-automatic pistol with 14 rounds of ammunition. Baines was prohibited from possessing the firearm and ammunition because of his prior felony convictions, including a conviction in 2011 in Tennessee state court for unlawful possession of a controlled substance with intent to sell and a conviction in Nevada federal court in 2014 for being a felon in possession of a firearm.

Lastly, Baines also trafficked narcotics. On January 31, 2020, at Memphis International Airport. Baines attempted to check a bag containing various controlled substances, including oxycodone, promethazine with codeine, alprazolam and more than seven pounds of marijuana.

The United States Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General; the United States Postal Inspection Service; IRS Criminal Investigation; and the California Employment Development Department investigated this matter. The United States Marshals Service, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, and the United States Attorney’s Office for the Western District of Tennessee provided substantial assistance.

Assistant United States Attorneys Rane A. Katzenstein, Chief of the Major Frauds Section, and Alexander B. Schwab, also of the Major Frauds Section, prosecuted this case.

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 Hotline at (866) 720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

Topic(s):

Coronavirus
Drug Trafficking
Firearms Offenses
Identity Theft

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