

Six Individuals Indicted and Arrested for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) Fraud and the Misuse of Social Security Numbers

Tuesday, May 23, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Puerto Rico

SAN JUAN, P.R. – On May 17, 2023, a Federal Grand Jury in the District of Puerto Rico returned six separate indictments charging six individuals with engaging in fraud to obtain Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) benefits totaling \$350,616, announced W. Stephen Muldrow, United States Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico. Various federal agencies were involved in the investigations, including the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS), the Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General (SSA OIG), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), with the assistance of the United States Department of Labor Office of Inspector General (USDOL-OIG), the Puerto Rico Department of Labor and Human Resources, and the Puerto Rico Police Bureau.

According to the indictments, the defendants engaged in schemes to defraud the Puerto Rico Department of Labor and Human Resources (Departamento del Trabajo y Recursos Humanos, "DTRH") by submitting fraudulent applications to obtain unemployment insurance benefits which contained PUA funds.

The defendants charged are: (1) Roberto J. Hernández Rivera, who fraudulently obtained \$103,422; (2) Jeremy Sánchez Rivera, who fraudulently obtained \$87,972; (3) Axel J. Pagán Rodríguez, who fraudulently obtained \$86,772; (4) Ednier Torres-Burgos, who fraudulently obtained \$34,956; (5) Eli Eteniel Correa Fernández, who fraudulently obtained \$19,380; and (6) Nomar J. Mimbs Machiavelo, who fraudulently obtained \$18,114.

"As our COVID-19 fraud prosecutions demonstrate, we continue to investigate these cases. Those who seek to make "easy" money by stealing federal funds from the government should take heed that there are consequences to your actions," said U.S. Attorney Muldrow.

"Operation Chango emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts between the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and our federal and state partners, reinforcing the U.S. Postal Inspection Service's mission of protecting the public and preventing the criminal misuse of our mail system." said Miami Division Postal Inspector in Charge Juan A. Vargas.

"This violation is not new. At this point, it is common knowledge that many thought they could take advantage of a global crisis and make additional income by breaking the law. This was never the case, it isn't the case now and it will never be the case," said Special Agent in Charge of the FBI San Juan Field Office, Joseph González. "No matter how long it takes, the FBI and our state and federal partners, will continue to investigate these cases to bring these criminals to Justice. So if you, or anyone you know has been a witness to this crime, you should report it by calling (787) 987-6500 or leaving a tip online by visiting [tips.FBI.gov](https://tips.fbi.gov). To those who know they've broken the law, it's best you reach out to us before we reach out to you."

Under the provisions of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, persons who were business owners, self-employed workers, independent contractors, or gig workers qualified for federal benefits administered by the DTRH if they previously performed such work in Puerto Rico and were unemployed, partially unemployed, unable to work, or unavailable to work due to a COVID-19 related reason. To obtain these federal benefits, individuals could apply online through the DTRH's web site—www.trabajo.pr.gov. Claimants answered various questions to establish their eligibility and were required to provide personal identifying information, which included their name, mailing address, gender, email, phone number, social security number, and date of birth. Moreover, claimants had to identify a qualifying occupational status and COVID-19 related reason for being out of work. In their application, claimants could also submit several documents as evidence of their income.

If the DTRH approved a claimant's application, the DTRH would send a check to the claimant via the United States Postal Service for qualified benefits which could contain regular unemployment insurance benefits and federal funds in the form of PUA, Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation, and Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation benefits.

The indictments charge the six individuals with theft of government money in PUA benefits, mail fraud and the misuse of Social Security numbers. The defendants engaged

in deceptive conduct designed to fraudulently obtain multiple unemployment checks via mail from the DTRH by using false social security numbers.

Special Assistant U.S. Attorneys Vanessa D. Bonano Rodríguez and R. Vance Eaton are in charge of the prosecution of these cases. If convicted, the defendants are facing the following sentences: 20 years of imprisonment for mail fraud and 10 years of imprisonment for theft of government money; a fine of up to \$250,000; and three years of supervised release.

To report a COVID-19-related fraud scheme or suspicious activity, contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) by calling the NCDF Hotline at 1-866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>

The indictments contain only charges and are not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed to be innocent unless and until proven guilty.

###

Updated May 23, 2023

Topics

CORONAVIRUS

DISASTER FRAUD

FINANCIAL FRAUD

Components

[Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#)

[USAO - Puerto Rico](#)