

PRESS RELEASE

East St. Louis Woman Sent to Prison for 44 Months and Ordered to Pay More Than \$800,000 in Restitution for Unemployment Insurance Scam

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Illinois

Lauren Barry, Public Affairs Officer

Lauren.Barry@usdoj.gov

EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill. – A U.S. District judge sentenced a woman from East St. Louis to spend the next 44 months in federal prison and ordered her to pay more than \$800,000 in restitution for her involvement in an unemployment insurance scheme that victimized three state unemployment agencies.

Talfanita M. Cobb, 51, previously pled guilty to three counts of mail fraud, conspiracy to commit mail fraud, and aggravated identity theft.

According to court documents, Cobb conspired with other individuals to use multiple stolen identities to apply for unemployment insurance benefits in Arizona, Ohio and Texas from at least September 2020 through January 2021. The fraudsters listed Cobb's address in East St. Louis on the applications, and once the applications were approved, debit cards containing unemployment benefits were mailed to Cobb.

Cobb used various ATMs in Belleville, Fairview Heights and O'Fallon, Illinois, to withdraw the funds from the debit cards. She then used Bitcoin to transfer most of the funds to her overseas co-conspirators. Cobb kept a percentage of the money for herself as her cut for assisting with the fraud.

The total amount of restitution Cobb was ordered to pay is \$862,625. That restitution will be repaid to the following entities: \$789,384 to the Arizona Department of Employment Security; \$54,443 to the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services; and \$18,798 to the Texas Workforce Commission.

"In an effort to enrich herself and dupe unemployment benefits programs, the defendant stole hundreds of thousands of dollars intended for pandemic relief support," said U.S. Attorney Rachelle Aud Crowe. "Federal authorities and prosecutors are cracking down on unemployment insurance fraud, and the Southern District of Illinois is committed to protecting the integrity of government programs."

"Today's sentencing closes the book on the defendant's mail fraud scheme in which she stole the identities of over 600 victims to obtain over \$800,000 in benefits ear-marked for those suffering from unemployment at the height of the Covid pandemic," said Inspector in Charge Ruth Mendonça who leads the Chicago Division of the United States Postal Inspection Service. "The Postal Inspection Service and its law enforcement partners will continue to aggressively pursue fraudsters who are driven by greed."

"Talfanita Cobb engaged in an unemployment insurance (UI) fraud scheme targeted at the state workforce agencies of Ohio, Arizona, and Texas. Cobb conspired to file false UI claims in the names of identity theft victims to obtain debit cards loaded with stolen UI benefits. Today's sentencing affirms the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General's commitment to ensuring the integrity of the unemployment insurance program. We will continue working with our law enforcement partners to aggressively investigate these types of allegations," said Irene Lindow, Special Agent in Charge, Great Lakes Region, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General.

Individuals like Cobb who help move funds for foreign fraud organizations are known as "Money Mules." The U.S. Department of Justice is cracking down on Money Mules; many are being prosecuted and sent to federal prison. Members of the public should be aware that if someone asks them to receive and transfers funds, there's a good chance they could be assisting with a crime and could end up behind bars.

The investigation was conducted by the St. Louis offices of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General. Assistant U.S. Attorney Scott Verseman prosecuted the case.

Updated May 16, 2023

Components

[Criminal - Criminal Fraud Section](#)

[USAO - Illinois, Southern](#)

