

PRESS RELEASE

Missouri Couple Sentenced for Unlawfully Obtaining COVID-19 Jobless Benefits

Thursday, May 18, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of West Virginia

CHARLESTON, W.Va. – A St. Charles, Missouri husband and wife were each sentenced to five years of federal probation today after unlawfully obtaining \$26,917 in unemployment benefits provided for by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program.

The CARES Act provided for a temporary emergency increase in unemployment compensation benefits, referred to as the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation Program (FPUC). The CARES Act also created the PUA program, which provided unemployment benefits to individuals not eligible for regular unemployment compensation or extended unemployment benefits. The FPUC and PUA programs are collectively referred to as pandemic unemployment benefits and even though these benefits are administered by the states, they are funded in part by the federal government.

According to court documents and statements made in court, Robert Notgrass, 51, and Rhonda Notgrass, 46, lived in Washington, West Virginia, when Robert Notgrass was employed as a pastor of a local church from before January 1, 2018, until he was released from that position on June 1, 2020.

On August 15, 2020, Rhonda Notgrass applied for pandemic unemployment benefits with WorkForce West Virginia, the agency that administers the pandemic unemployment benefits for West Virginians. Rhonda Notgrass falsely claimed that she was unemployed as a direct result of a pandemic or major disaster. Robert Notgrass helped his wife complete the application and submitted a letter on her behalf in furtherance of the false claim.

On September 16, 2020, Rhonda Notgrass received approximately \$14,150 in pandemic unemployment benefits payment from WorkForce West Virginia. The payment included federal monies from the CARES Act. Rhonda Notgrass admitted that she knew she was not entitled to receive the pandemic unemployment benefits. Rhonda Notgrass pleaded guilty to theft of government property.

Robert Notgrass admitted to wrongly receiving \$12,767 in pandemic unemployment benefits. Robert Notgrass pleaded guilty to aiding and abetting the theft of government property.

The couple has fully paid the \$26,917 in court-ordered restitution.

United States Attorney Will Thompson made the announcement and commended the investigative work of the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General (OIG) and WorkForce West Virginia.

United States District Judge Irene C. Berger imposed the sentence. Assistant United States Attorneys Erik S. Goes and Kathleen Robeson prosecuted 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>.

A copy of this press release is located on the website of the [U.S. Attorney's Office](#) for the Southern District of West Virginia. Related court documents and information can be found on [PACER](#) by searching for Case Nos. 2:23-cr-16 and 2:23-cr-17.

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