

## PRESS RELEASE

# Baltimore Woman Pleads Guilty to Accepting Bribes and Defrauding Maryland Unemployment Insurance Program

Wednesday, September 17, 2025

### For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Maryland

**Former Maryland Department of Labor contractor admits to authorizing more than \$250,000 in fraudulent unemployment benefits scheme.**

**Baltimore, Maryland** – Natonia Johnson, 52, of Baltimore, Maryland, pled guilty today, to one count of wire fraud in connection with a bribery scheme that she conducted as a Maryland Department of Labor (MD-DOL) contractor to issue fraudulent unemployment insurance funds.

Kelly O. Hayes, U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland, announced the guilty plea with Special Agent in Charge Troy W. Springer, National Capital Region, U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG), and Acting Special Agent in Charge Evan Campanella, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) – Baltimore.

Unemployment insurance (UI) is a joint state and federal program that provided monetary benefits to eligible beneficiaries. UI payments are intended to provide temporary financial assistance to lawful workers who became unemployed through no fault of their own. Beginning in or around March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, several federal programs expanded UI eligibility and increased UI benefits. This included the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation, and Lost Wages Assistance Program.

In Maryland, residents seeking UI benefits submit online applications. In the application, applicants must answer specific questions to establish eligibility to receive UI benefits, including their name, Social Security Number (SSN), and mailing address, among other things. Additionally, the State requires applicants to self-certify that they are unemployed, partially employed, or unable to work for a COVID-19-related reason. The MD-DOL relies upon the information from the application to determine UI benefits eligibility.

According to the guilty plea, between June 2020 until about November 2021, Johnson executed a scheme to defraud the MD-DOL and United States. Johnson assisted friends, family members, and strangers with fraudulently filing and obtaining UI benefits they were not eligible to receive in exchange for bribes and kickback payments.

Initially, Johnson assisted individuals with uploading fraudulent documents in support of UI claims. She then falsely asserted that these individuals were self-employed. Later, through her employment as a contractor at Company #1, Johnson staffed MD-DOL's UI call center and gained access to MD-DOL's internal UI database. Then Johnson used this access to remove flags and holds on various co-conspirators' UI accounts that established these individuals were ineligible to receive UI benefits. Additionally, Johnson backdated claims, removed fraud holds, and caused MD-DOL to issue additional UI benefits that these co-conspirators were ineligible to receive. In exchange, Johnson received between \$200 and \$500 from each co-conspirator whose claims she assisted with. Through the scheme, Johnson defrauded the MD-DOL of more than \$250,000 in UI claims.

Johnson faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, followed by three years of supervised release. Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties. A federal district court judge determines sentencing after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors. Sentencing is scheduled for January 6, 2026, at 11 a.m.

The District of Maryland Strike Force is one of five strike forces established throughout the United States by the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate and prosecute COVID-19 fraud, including fraud relating to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The CARES Act was designed to provide emergency financial assistance to Americans suffering the economic effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strike forces focus on large-scale, multi-state pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors. The strike forces are interagency law enforcement efforts, using prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams designed to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds.

For more information on the Department's response to the pandemic, visit [justice.gov/coronavirus](https://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: [justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form](https://justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form).

U.S. Attorney Hayes commended the DOL-OIG and HSI for their work in the investigation. Ms. Hayes thanked Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph L. Wenner who is

prosecuting the federal case. She also recognized the Maryland COVID-19 Strike Force and Paralegal Specialist Joanna B.N. Huber for their valuable assistance.

For more information about the Maryland U.S. Attorney's Office, its priorities, and resources available to report fraud, visit [justice.gov/usao-md](https://justice.gov/usao-md) and [justice.gov/usao-md/community-outreach](https://justice.gov/usao-md/community-outreach).

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