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Division of Criminal Justice

- Elie Honig, *Director*

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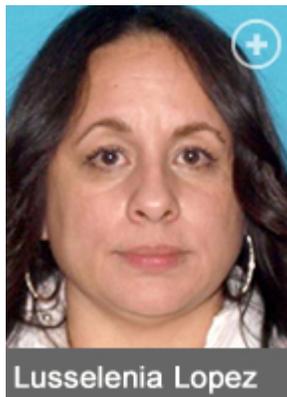
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Former Labor Department Clerk Sentenced to Prison for Stealing \$56,000 in Unemployment Benefits by Fraudulently Altering Claims



TRENTON – Attorney General Christopher S. Porrino announced that a former clerk for the State Department of Labor and Workforce Development was sentenced to prison today for stealing approximately \$56,000 in unemployment benefits by using her access to the department’s computer system to fraudulently alter claims to provide benefits to family members who were not entitled to them, or, in one case, to steal benefits from a stranger by redirecting his benefits to her own bank account.

Lusselena Lopez, 48, of Woodbridge, N.J., a former state unemployment insurance clerk based in Elizabeth, was sentenced to five years in state prison by Superior Court Judge Stuart Peim in Union County. She pleaded guilty on Jan. 17 to second-degree conspiracy to commit official misconduct. Lopez and two daughters of Lopez who received stolen benefits must pay full restitution to the state. The two daughters were admitted into the Pretrial Intervention Program. Lopez is permanently barred from public employment in New Jersey.

Deputy Attorney General Gezim Bajrami took the guilty plea from Lopez and handled the sentencing for the Division of Criminal Justice Specialized Crimes Bureau. Lopez

was indicted last year in an investigation by the Division of Criminal Justice, the U.S. Department of Labor-Office of Inspector General, and the New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development-Office of Internal Audit.

“Rather than honestly serving the public and New Jersey workers, Lopez used her access to labor department computers to steal \$56,000 in unemployment benefits for herself and her daughters,” said Attorney General Porrino. “This prison sentence demonstrates that we have zero tolerance for government employees like Lopez who corruptly betray the public’s trust for their personal gain.”

“As Lopez has learned, those who steal from government programs in New Jersey will face stern punishment, especially if they are public employees entrusted with administering them,” said Director Elie Honig of the Division of Criminal Justice. “We’ll continue to work closely with our state and federal labor department partners to safeguard this important financial lifeline for workers.”

“When government employees, like Lusselenia Lopez, abuse their positions and defraud the very programs they are responsible for protecting, such conduct erodes the public’s confidence in the government and takes precious tax dollars away from those in need of unemployment insurance benefits. We will continue to work with the New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice and the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development to ensure the integrity of the New Jersey Unemployment Insurance Program,” said Michael C. Mikulka, Special Agent in Charge, New York Region, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General.

“We applaud the efforts of the Attorney General and will continue to work with their office, as well as other state and local authorities, to aggressively combat cases of fraud which impact all New Jerseyans,” said Acting Commissioner Aaron Fichtner of the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

The investigation revealed that Lopez stole a total of more than \$31,000 through two separate claims for unemployment insurance filed by one of her daughters, one claim filed in May 2009 and the second in August 2011. In each instance, the daughter was deemed ineligible for benefits because she was terminated from her prior employment for cause. However, in each case, Lopez went into the labor department computer system to reverse the denial of benefits so that her daughter received numerous benefit payments that were deposited into bank accounts of the daughter and Lopez.

The investigation further revealed that Lopez stole \$1,680 in unemployment benefits on a claim filed by her late husband. For four weeks after he passed away in August 2011, Lopez continued to receive benefits on his claim by certifying each week that her husband was able and available to work.

Lopez assisted a second daughter to receive more than \$9,000 in unemployment benefits to which she was not entitled. That daughter obtained a new job which made her ineligible for benefits, but Lopez underreported the daughter’s income in a manner that made her appear eligible for full benefits.

Finally, the investigation revealed that Lopez stole nearly \$14,000 by diverting benefits from a man whose claim had been temporarily suspended. In September 2013, Lopez went into the labor department computer system and reactivated the claim, while

changing the address on the claim and directing that payments be direct-deposited into her own bank account.

The two daughters who were involved in the fraudulent claims pleaded guilty in February to second-degree conspiracy to commit official misconduct, but they were admitted into the Pretrial Intervention Program. If they successfully complete the program, their charges will be dismissed; if they do not, they will be subject to a state prison sentence.

Supervising Deputy Attorney General Andrew Johns, Deputy Chief of the Specialized Crimes Bureau, presented the case to the state grand jury. The investigation was conducted for the Division of Criminal Justice Specialized Crimes Bureau by Detective Christine Sullivan and Deputy Bureau Chief Johns. Attorney General Porrino commended Special Agents from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, under the leadership of Special Agent in Charge Michael Mikulka, for assisting in this case. He also thanked the Fraud Investigators of the New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development, Office of Internal Audit, under the leadership of Director Jerry Calamia.

Attorney General Porrino and Director Honig noted that the Division of Criminal Justice has established a toll-free Corruption Tipline **1-866-TIPS-4CJ** for the public to confidentially report corruption, financial crime and other illegal activities. The public also can log on to the Division's web page at www.njdcj.org to report suspected wrongdoing confidentially.

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