

PRESS RELEASE

Georgia State Representative charged with pandemic unemployment fraud

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For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of Georgia

ATLANTA - Sharon Henderson, a member of the Georgia House of Representatives, was arrested today and should appear in court this afternoon after a federal grand jury charged her with two counts of theft of government funds and ten counts of making false statements.

"It is shocking that a public official would allegedly lie to profit from an emergency program designed to help suffering community members," said United States Attorney Theodore S. Hertzberg. "Politicians who violate the public trust and steal from the needy to enrich themselves will be held accountable."

"Sharon Henderson allegedly chose greed over compassion by fraudulently obtaining funds meant to help those in need, some in her own Georgia House district," said FBI Atlanta Special Agent in Charge Paul Brown. "We remain committed to find those who take advantage of federal programs meant to help those truly in need."

"An important part of the mission of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General is to investigate allegations of fraud involving unemployment insurance programs. We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to aggressively investigate these types of allegations," said Mathew Broadhurst, Special Agent in Charge, Southeast Region, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General.

"Nobody is above the law, especially Georgia's elected officials. This indictment should send a clear message that theft of government funds intended for qualified citizens will not be tolerated," said Georgia State Inspector General Nigel Lange. "GA-OIG appreciates the efforts of our state and federal partners in bringing this case for prosecution."

According to U.S. Attorney Hertzberg, the charges, and other information presented in court: In 2020, in response to the forced closures of businesses and unprecedented economic hardship resulting from the COVID-19 emergency, the U.S. Congress created special unemployment compensation programs to provide cash assistance to individuals who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Applicants for the programs had to provide their recent work histories and confirm, among other things, that COVID-19 was the reason they were unemployed. Applicants also had to provide a certification for every week for which they wished to claim benefits, attesting to whether they were actively seeking work for the week and the reason they were unemployed.

In June 2020, while a candidate for a Georgia House seat, Henderson allegedly applied for federal pandemic unemployment benefits claiming that her current employer was Henry County Schools. Although Henderson had worked as a substitute teacher for Henry County Schools for five days in 2018 (almost two years prior), she had not worked for Henry County Schools since then. Additionally, the Substitute Teacher Agreement Henderson signed in 2018 included an acknowledgment that substitute teachers are not eligible to draw unemployment wages. Nevertheless, Henderson allegedly stated in the application that she had worked for the school system throughout 2019 and as recently as March 10, 2020; that she had paystubs as evidence of that employment in 2019; and that her place of employment was closed as a direct result of the COVID-19 public health emergency. She then allegedly submitted weekly certifications stating that she was unable to reach her place of employment because of a COVID-19 quarantine. She allegedly submitted eight of those certifications in June 2021, after she was sworn in and serving as the state representative for District 113, which covers western Newton County and part of Covington, Georgia.

Henderson allegedly collected \$17,811 of pandemic unemployment benefits to which she was not entitled as a result of false statements in her application and weekly certifications.

Henderson should appear before U.S. Magistrate Judge Justin S. Anand at 1:00 p.m. today and is expected to enter a not-guilty plea. Members of the public are reminded that the indictment only contains charges. The defendant is presumed innocent of the charges, and it will be the government's burden to prove the defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at trial.

This case is being investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, Georgia Office of the State Inspector General, and DeKalb County District Attorney's Office.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Garrett L. Bradford is prosecuting 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>.

For further information please contact the U.S. Attorney's Public Affairs Office at USAGAN.PressEmails@usdoj.gov or (404) 581-6016. The Internet address for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia is <http://www.justice.gov/usao-ndga>.

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