

PRESS RELEASE

Georgia siblings sentenced to federal prison for defrauding unemployment, COVID-19 relief programs

Monday, June 10, 2024

For Immediate Release

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

Sentence includes more than \$140,000 in restitution

AUGUSTA, GA: Two Georgia siblings have been sentenced to federal prison and ordered to repay stolen funds after pleading guilty in a fraud conspiracy.

La'Kyera Me'Lika Thurmond, 35, of Snellville, Ga., and **Brandon Jamal Thurmond**, 34, of Lilburn, Ga., were sentenced in U.S. District Court after pleading guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud, said Jill E. Steinberg, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia. Each was sentenced to 21 months in prison followed by three years of supervised release. U.S. District Court Judge J. Randal Hall also ordered the siblings to pay \$140,228 in restitution.

"Programs that provided unemployment benefits and disaster relief served as a lifeline to small businesses during the pandemic," said U.S. Attorney Steinberg. "The Thurmonds' greed-fueled scheme targeted both programs, and they're now being held accountable for their crimes."

As described in court documents and testimony, the Thurmonds used fraudulent documents to file for unemployment benefits in multiple states for Brandon Thurmond – who was serving a prison sentence on state charges in Georgia at the time and therefore ineligible to receive unemployment benefits – and for other individuals through the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program and other relief initiatives.

The Thurmond siblings also filed multiple fraudulent applications in Brandon Thurmond's name and others seeking Paycheck Protection Program funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act administered by the Small Business Administration.

The restitution in the case represents payments the Thurmonds and others fraudulently received for unemployment benefits from Georgia and Arizona, and for COVID-19 relief payments from the SBA and a financial services company.

"It is disheartening to see the willingness of some individuals to take advantage of programs intended to help people in need during a national and world crisis," said Matthew Ploskunak, Senior Supervisory Special Agent of FBI Atlanta's Augusta office. "The Thurmond's personal greed affects every tax paying citizen, in particular those who needed help most. The FBI will make every effort to make sure federal funds are used as intended."

"Abusing SBA's pandemic relief programs intended to provide critical relief to small businesses is unconscionable," said SBA OIG's Eastern Region Special Agent in Charge Amaleka McCall-Braithwaite. "This sentencing further showcases that OIG will relentlessly pursue fraudsters and bring them to justice. I want to thank the U.S. Attorney's Office and our law enforcement partners for their dedication and commitment to seeing justice served."

"These current sentencing of those who committed fraud on COVID-19 relief programs is sending the message that accountability is coming for those who did the same," said Demetrius Hardeman, Acting Special Agent in Charge, IRS Criminal Investigation, Atlanta Field Office. "IRS Criminal Investigation special agents and our law enforcement partners will continue finding and investigating individuals who chose greed over the well-being of their fellow Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic."

"The Thurmonds engaged in an unemployment insurance (UI) fraud scheme targeted at multiple state workforce agencies. They used the identities of others to submit fraudulent UI applications. As a result, they stole UI benefits intended for individuals who experienced financial hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Mathew Broadhurst, Special Agent-in-Charge, Southeast Region, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General. "We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to protect the integrity of these critical benefit programs."

The case was investigated by the FBI, the Small Business Administration Office of Inspector General, IRS Criminal Investigation, and the U.S. Department of Labor, and prosecuted for the United States by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer A. Stanley.

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](tel:866-720-5721) or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

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