

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **Siblings Plead Guilty to COVID Relief Fraud**

Tuesday, February 4, 2025

**For Immediate Release**

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

Hattiesburg, MS – A Forrest County man and woman pled guilty to conspiring with each other to fraudulently obtain unemployment insurance benefits related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to court documents and statements made in court, Artista Garner, 36, of Hattiesburg, assisted her brother, Thaddieus Cooper, 31, in applying for benefits with the Mississippi Department of Employment Security. As an inmate in the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC), Cooper was not entitled to receive unemployment insurance benefits. Cooper was serving a sentence of six years in MDOC custody for armed robbery. Garner used the unemployment funds for her personal benefit and transferred some of the funds to Cooper via his commissary fund.

The unemployment insurance benefits were federally subsidized through the CARES Act in response to the pandemic.

A federal grand jury returned an indictment against Cooper and Garner on September 10, 2024. Both Cooper and Garner pled guilty on January 30, 2025, to conspiracy to commit wire fraud. They are scheduled to be sentenced on June 12, 2025, and they each face a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Acting United States Attorney Patrick A. Lemon, Mississippi State Auditor Shad White, and Special Agent in Charge Mathew Broadhurst of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Southeast Region made the announcement.

The U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General and the Mississippi Office of the State Auditor investigated the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kimberly T. Purdie is prosecuting the case.

This case is being prosecuted as part of the Department of Justice's National Unemployment Insurance Fraud Task Force (NUIFTF). In response to the unprecedented scope of Unemployment Insurance (UI) fraud, the Department of Justice established the NUIFTF. The NUIFTF is a prosecutor-led multi-agency task force with representatives from FBI, DOL-OIG, IRS-CI, HSI, DHS-OIG, USPIS, USSS, SSA-OIG, FDIC-OIG, and other agencies. Members of the NUIFTF are working with state workforce agencies, financial institutions, and other law enforcement partners across the country to fight UI fraud, and consumers should be vigilant in light of these threats and take the appropriate steps to safeguard themselves.

The CARES Act is a federal law enacted on March 29, 2020, designed to provide emergency financial assistance to the millions of Americans who are suffering the economic effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One source of relief provided by the CARES Act is the authorization that expands states' ability to provide unemployment insurance for many workers impacted by COVID-19, including for workers who are not ordinarily eligible for unemployment insurance benefits.

Anyone with information about attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice's National Center for Disaster Fraud Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

*Updated February 4, 2025*

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**Topic**

**CORONAVIRUS**

**Component**

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