

PRESS RELEASE

Three Individuals Sentenced for Fraudulently Obtaining Pandemic Unemployment Assistance on Behalf of Ineligible Persons, Including Prison Inmates

Thursday, September 19, 2024

For Immediate Release

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

PHOENIX, Ariz. – Likishe Jhanell Kelly, 43, of Phoenix, Antoinette Coleman, 36, of Glendale, and Christine Boston, 52, of Mesa have been sentenced in connection with a scheme to use the identities of prison inmates and others to fraudulently obtain federal unemployment benefits under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. All three individuals admitted they facilitated the filing of false claims for pandemic unemployment benefits by fraudulently using other identities, including those of imprisoned individuals.

Kelly was sentenced last week by United States District Judge Susan M. Brnovich to 36 months in prison and mandated to pay \$375,094 in restitution to the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES). Kelly pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud on November 21, 2023. Coleman was also sentenced last week by Judge Brnovich to five years of probation and mandated to pay \$19,678 in restitution to DES. Coleman pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud on January 16, 2024. Boston was sentenced by Judge Brnovich on July 9, 2024, to 36 months in prison and ordered to pay \$97,596 in restitution to DES. Boston also pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud on January 3, 2024.

Kelly, Coleman, and Boston acknowledged their role in helping file applications for inmates who did not actually lose their jobs due to COVID. Boston was incarcerated during the time of this scheme and transmitted the necessary inmate information for the filing of applications to Kelly and Coleman. Boston emailed Coleman from the Arizona State Prison in Goodyear to recruit Coleman to facilitate processing inmate applications

for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance benefits. Kelly would then file the fraudulent applications and weekly certifications in the name of Boston and other inmates. Kelly compensated Boston for providing the inmate information by depositing money into her Arizona state prison commissary account.

Additionally, Kelly submitted fraudulent applications and weekly certifications on behalf of other ineligible individuals, including Coleman. Coleman processed and filed two fraudulent applications. In total, between May 2020 and December 2020, Kelly and her co-defendants submitted at least 42 fraudulent applications, obtaining approximately \$375,094 in illicit funds.

"During the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, Congress expanded eligibility for employees to receive unemployment benefits and made it easier to submit an application," said United States Attorney Gary Restaino. "Sadly, some Arizonans took advantage of the emergency and defrauded our State. The sentences and restitution orders imposed in this case send an important deterrent message to those who seek gains based on others' misfortune."

"We appreciate our continuous collaboration with the United States Department of Labor and the Office of Inspector General to identify and hold accountable those who exploit the system and engage in Unemployment Insurance fraud," stated Angie Rodgers, Director of the Arizona Department of Economic Security. "Our agencies are resolute in our dedication to preserving the integrity of the unemployment insurance benefits program."

The United States Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, and the Arizona Department of Economic Security conducted the investigation in this case. Assistant U.S. Attorney Kristen Brook, U.S. Attorney's Office, Phoenix, handled the prosecution.

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