

PRESS RELEASE

Trio sentenced to prison for multi-state wire and bank fraud conspiracy

Thursday, November 14, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Virginia

Arrow key points to prison

ALEXANDRIA, Va. – Three men have been sentenced to prison for their roles in a conspiracy to cash fraudulent checks and obtain pandemic relief benefits using stolen identities.

According to court documents, from at least May 2020 through January 2022, Deandre Merritt, aka Dre, Scam Likely, and John Adams, 29, of Hyattsville, Maryland, coordinated and participated in schemes to cash stolen or altered checks and use the personal identifying information of unwitting victims to fraudulently claim pandemic relief benefits. The conspirators used fake identification documents in both schemes.

Merritt and at least one other coconspirator obtained U.S. Postal Service (USPS) arrow keys, which are universal keys used by mail carriers and collectors that can unlock various USPS collection boxes. Merritt and his co-conspirators stole checks from USPS collection boxes. The conspirators then created fraudulent checks by altering stolen checks or creating new fraudulent checks using the checks' information such as the payees' names, addresses, and account numbers, as well as the routing number of the bank.

Merritt conspired with a bank teller who would tell Merritt if a check could be cashed, and Merritt would provide conspirators with checks and direct them to the teller. Among the conspirators Merritt directed to cash checks was Sylvester E. Hawkins II, 31, of Buffalo, New York.

Merritt and Hawkins worked with Trevon Thompson, aka Rell and Zoe Bands, 23, of La Plata, Maryland, and other coconspirators to obtain illegitimate identification documents, including driver licenses and passport documents, in the names of other people, but which pictured Thompson or Hawkins. Merritt and Thompson then used these illegitimate identification documents in various fraudulent schemes, such as obtaining cellphones,

opening bank accounts, and obtaining debit cards, credit cards, loans, and lines of credit. Merritt recruited individuals, including drug addicts, to go into banks with the illegitimate identification documents as necessary.

Thompson, Merritt and Hawkins used an illegitimate driver license in the name of an identity theft victim to apply for and receive a loan of approximately \$20,833 through the Paycheck Protection Program, a pandemic relief program.

Merritt, Thompson, Hawkins, and other co-conspirators used the fake identification documents and stolen personal identifying information to apply for pandemic and unemployment insurance (UI) benefits intended to assist those who lost their jobs through no-fault of their own or whose employment was negatively impacted by COVID-19.

Over the course of the bank fraud conspiracy, Merritt directed at least 15 individuals into bank branches, and the overall bank fraud conspiracy caused an actual loss of at least \$575,579. The overall wire and bank fraud conspiracy related to the fraudulent pandemic and UI benefit applications caused an actual loss of at least \$506,308. An additional loss of approximately \$20,833 was caused by the fraudulent PPP loan. The conspiracy used the personal identifying information of at least 10 victims.

Thompson pled guilty on Aug. 1 to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud. On Oct. 18 he was sentenced to two years and nine months in prison.

Hawkins pled guilty on July 17 to conspiracy to commit bank fraud. On Nov. 5 he was sentenced to one year and three months in prison.

Merritt pled guilty on Aug. 27 to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud. He was sentenced yesterday to five years and six months in prison.

Jessica D. Aber, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia; David E. Geist, Acting Special Agent in Charge of the FBI Washington Field Office's Criminal and Cyber Division; Damon E. Wood, Inspector in Charge of the Washington Division of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; Troy W. Springer, Special Agent in Charge, National Capital Region, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General; and Kevin Davis, Fairfax County Chief of Police, made the announcement after sentencing by Senior U.S. District Judge Anthony J. Trenga.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathleen Robeson and Kimberly M. Shartar prosecuted the case.

A copy of this press release is located on the website of the [U.S. Attorney's Office](#) for the Eastern District of Virginia. Related court documents and information are located on the

website of the [District Court](#) for the Eastern District of Virginia or on [PACER](#) by searching for Case No. 1:24-cr-98.

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Topic

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