

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
District of Puerto Rico

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Twelve Individuals Indicted And Arrested For
Unemployment Benefits And Pandemic Unemployment
Assistance (PUA) Fraud**

SAN JUAN, P.R. – On April 7 and 8, 2021, the Federal Grand Jury in the District of Puerto Rico returned eleven separate indictments charging twelve (12) individuals with fraud against the Unemployment Insurance and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, announced W. Stephen Muldrow, U.S. Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico. These cases were investigated by various federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS), the United States Department of Labor Office of Inspector General (USDOL-OIG), the Social Security Office of Inspector General (SSA-OIG), and the United States Postal Service Office of Inspector General (USPS-OIG), with the assistance of local law enforcement officials from the Puerto Rico Police Bureau (PRPB), Puerto Rico Department of Labor and Human Resources, Puerto Rico Office of Inspector General (PR-OIG), and the Puerto Rico Department of Treasury (Hacienda).

According to the indictments, the defendants engaged in schemes to defraud the Puerto Rico Department of Labor and Human Resources (Departamento del Trabajo y Recursos Humanos, “DTRH”) by submitting fraudulent applications for unemployment insurance benefits, including Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) benefits. The false information submitted included false social security numbers and false employment information. The loss associated with these cases totals \$419,580.

Under the PUA provisions of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), a person who is a business owner, self-employed worker, independent contractor, or gig worker qualified for PUA benefits administered by the DTRH if he/she previously performed such work in Puerto Rico and was unemployed, partially unemployed, unable to work, or unavailable to work due to a COVID-19 related reason.

To obtain these federal benefits, individuals could apply online through the DTRH’s web site—www.trabajo.pr.gov. Claimants answered various questions to establish their eligibility. Furthermore, claimants were required to provide personal identifying information, which included their name, mailing address, gender, email, phone number, social security number, and date of birth (collectively referred to as personal identification information). Moreover, claimants had to identify a qualifying occupational status and COVID-19 related reason for being out of work. Claimants could also submit several documents as evidence of their income.

If the DTRH approved the claimant’s application, the DTRH would send a check to the claimant via United States Postal Service for qualified benefits which could contain regular Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits and federal funds in the form of Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC), PUA, and Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) benefits.

Ten indictments charge nine individuals with theft of government property and mail fraud. The defendants engaged in deceptive conduct designed to fraudulently obtain multiple unemployment checks from the DTRH by using false social security numbers. The defendants received UI benefits from the DTRH via mail in the form of checks that they were not qualified or authorized to receive. The defendants negotiated the various check fraudulently obtained from the DTRH.

The defendants charged in nine related indictments are: Millisen M. Martínez-Medina, who fraudulently obtained \$54,870; her consensual partner Luis Cruz-Reyes, who fraudulently obtained \$64,992; Jonathan Rivera-Gutiérrez, who fraudulently obtained \$44,148; Jennifer Hernández-Romero, who fraudulently obtained \$36,222; Mary L. Benitez-Ortiz, who fraudulently obtained \$32,628; Daniel Colón-Díaz, who fraudulently obtained \$68,250; Gabriel A. Robles-Guzmán, who fraudulently obtained \$33,030; Denisse Sánchez-Ortiz, who fraudulently obtained \$23,172; and Luis A. Flores-Díaz, who fraudulently obtained \$20,910.

Defendant Millisen M. Martínez-Medina is also facing two counts of aggravated identity theft for using other people's Social Security numbers without their authorization, during and in relation to a felony, that is, the mail fraud scheme.

In another indictment, defendants José Daniel Le Hardy-Figueroa, a U.S. Postal Employee, and Christoffer Pérez-Vélez, are charged with conspiracy to commit mail fraud, mail fraud and theft of government moneys in an amount of \$11,388. The defendants conspired to fraudulently represent to the DTRH that José Daniel Le Hardy-Figueroa was an unemployed barber, when in fact he was a mail carrier employed by the United States Postal Service.

In the final indictment, defendant Félix R. Cruz-Santana, who fraudulently obtained \$29,970, is charged with mail fraud, theft of government money, and misuse of a social security number.

“These defendants participated in a scheme to capitalize on the pandemic by filing fraudulent PUA applications and illegally enriching themselves at the expense of the government and taxpayers,” said U.S. Attorney Muldrow. “The United States Department of Justice, along with our state and federal counterparts, will continue to aggressively pursue those who seek to illegally exploit the ongoing national emergency for their own benefit. We commend the outstanding work and collaboration of our law enforcement partners in the investigation of these cases.”

Special Assistant U.S. Attorney (SAUSA) Vanessa D. Bonano-Rodríguez from the Social Security Administration; SAUSA Camille García-Jiménez from the United States Postal Service, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Victor Acevedo are in charge of the prosecution of these cases. If convicted, the defendants are facing the following sentences: 20 years of imprisonment for mail fraud and conspiracy to commit mail fraud; 10 years of imprisonment for theft of government money; and 5 years of imprisonment for misuse of Social Security number, a fine of up to \$250,000 and three years of supervised release. Defendant Millisen M. Martínez-Medina also faces a two-year mandatory term of imprisonment for the aggravated identity theft charge.

To report a COVID-19-related fraud scheme or suspicious activity, contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) by calling the NCDF Hotline at 1-866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>

The indictments contain only charges and are not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed to be innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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