

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Southern District of Georgia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Two felons admit guilt in scheme to steal thousands in COVID-19 unemployment insurance funds

Florida residents arrested after chase, crash in Georgia

SAVANNAH, GA: Two Florida residents have admitted they colluded in a scheme to steal pandemic unemployment funds.

Tamesha Lashelle Brown, 41, of Dade City, Fla., and **Malik Abdul McCaully**, 43, of Tampa, pled guilty in U.S. District Court to Informations charging each of them with conspiring to commit various offenses, including mail fraud, wire fraud, bank fraud, disaster relief fraud, and access device fraud, said David H. Estes, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia. The charge carries a maximum statutory penalty of up to five years in federal prison, along with substantial financial penalties and up to three years of supervised release. There is no parole in the federal system.

“COVID-19 relief funds approved by Congress were intended specifically to help unemployed citizens struggling financially during the pandemic,” said Acting U.S. Attorney Estes. “These defendants created a scheme to steal those funds for their own enrichment – but that scheme came to an end in Georgia.”

As described in court documents and testimony, Brown and McCaully were both convicted felons who obtained personal identifying information of other individuals, without those individuals' knowledge or consent, and then used that information to file fraudulent applications for unemployment assistance, including with the State of Pennsylvania. The two posed as the applicants when communicating with banks distributing the payments. After fraudulently obtaining bank cards preloaded with more than \$100,000 in unemployment insurance funds, Brown and McCaully travelled to various ATMs in Pennsylvania, withdrawing thousands of dollars.

The two came to the attention of law enforcement in the early morning hours of Oct. 3, 2020, when a vehicle driven by McCaully sped from an attempted traffic stop by Jasper County, S.C., sheriff's deputies on Interstate 95. McCaully eventually crashed the vehicle in Pooler, Georgia, and he – and his passenger, Brown – were taken into custody. Inside the vehicle, law enforcement recovered more than \$20,000 in cash, dozens of prepaid debit cards issued by states' unemployment insurance funds in the names of others, as well as several false identifications that the two had used.

“It is disheartening to see the willingness of some individuals to take advantage of people in need during a national and world crisis,” said Chris Hacker, Special Agent in Charge of FBI Atlanta. “Their personal greed affects every taxpaying citizen, in particular those who need help most. The FBI will make every effort to make sure federal funds are used as intended.”

The FBI, the U.S. Secret Service, and the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, with the assistance of the Pooler Police Department, Port Wentworth Police Department, and the Georgia State Patrol investigated the case. It was prosecuted for the United States by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Georgia.

Please report COVID-19 fraud, hoarding or price-gouging to the National Center for Disaster Fraud's National Hotline at (866) 720-5721, or go to justice.gov/disastercomplaintform.

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Contact:

Barry L. Paschal, Public Affairs Officer: 912-652-4422

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