

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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3 Inland Empire Women Plead Guilty to Wire Fraud for Illegally Obtaining COVID-Related Jobless Benefits in Prison Inmates' Names

RIVERSIDE, California – Three Inland Empire women have pleaded guilty to federal criminal charges accusing them of using information belonging to other people – including California state prison inmates – to file for pandemic-related unemployment benefits, with each defendant causing at least \$350,000 in losses.

Paris Denise Thomas, 33, of San Bernardino, pleaded guilty today to a one-count information charging her with wire fraud. United States District Judge Jesus G. Bernal has scheduled a September 13 sentencing hearing.

On Friday, Sequoia Edwards, 35, of Moreno Valley, and Mireya Ramos, 42, of Colton, each pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud. United States District Judge John W. Holcomb has scheduled an August 27 sentencing hearing for Ramos. Edwards' sentencing hearing will be scheduled on a later date set by Judge Holcomb.

As a result of their guilty pleas, all three women face a statutory maximum sentence of 30 years in federal prison.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress and signed into law in March 2020 provided additional unemployment insurance (UI) benefits to qualified individuals and helped provide UI benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic to people who did not otherwise qualify, including business owners, self-employed workers, independent contractors, and those with a limited work history.

According to her plea agreement, from June 2020 to December 2020, Thomas submitted at least 47 fraudulent UI claims to the California Employment Development Department (EDD), which administers the UI program in California.

Thomas admitted to receiving the names, Social Security numbers, dates of birth and other personally identifiable information of California state prison inmates and others, which she used to submit applications for UI benefits via the internet as if those persons were submitting the claims themselves. Thomas falsely represented to the EDD that the inmates were unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In exchange for cash payments, Thomas provided third parties with the electronic benefit payment debit cards which were loaded periodically with UI benefits and EDD website login credentials linked to the fraudulent UI claims.

In total, Thomas caused EDD to disburse approximately \$477,000 in fraudulently obtained unemployment benefits.

Edwards admitted in her plea agreement that, from July 2020 to August 2020, she submitted at least 27 fraudulent UI claims to the EDD using the information of California state prison inmates and other people, and falsely stating they had lost their jobs because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In

total, Edwards caused the EDD to disburse approximately \$456,218 in UI benefits from July 2020 to March 2021.

Ramos admitted that, from June 2020 to December 2020, she submitted approximately 37 fraudulent UI claims to the EDD using the personal information of California prison inmates and others, falsely representing to the EDD that the inmates were unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ramos entered false occupations for each “applicant” and created various email addresses so she could monitor the status of each application, according to her plea agreement.

In total, Ramos caused the EDD to fraudulently disburse approximately \$353,532 in UI benefits from June 2020 to January 2021.

The United States Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, the FBI, and the United States Postal Inspection Service investigated these matters. Investigators with the California Employment Development Department and special agents from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation – Office of Correctional Safety provided substantial assistance.

Assistant United States Attorney Byron R. Tuyay of the Riverside Branch Office is prosecuting these cases.

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