

PRESS RELEASE

5 Charged in Alleged \$3.3 Million Scam to Obtain COVID Jobless Benefits for Unqualified Individuals, Including Children and Inmates

Thursday, March 6, 2025

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Central District of California

LOS ANGELES – Five defendants – including a California Highway Patrol (CHP) dispatcher and her convicted-felon husband – have been taken into federal custody on a 10-count indictment alleging they fraudulently obtained more than \$3.3 million in COVID-19 government unemployment benefits using stolen identities and personal identifiable information, the Justice Department announced today.

The following defendants were charged by a federal grand jury with one count of conspiracy to commit bank fraud:

- Janet Clarise Gloria Theus, 44, of Lancaster;
- Diane Clarise Theus, 78, of Lancaster, Janet Theus' mother;
- Dailen Spears, 24, of Carson;
- Erica Abson Robins, 57, of Compton, a CHP dispatcher; and
- Ronald Lee Robins, 62, of Compton, Erica Robins' husband, who was serving a state prison sentence for first-degree burglary during the alleged scheme.

Janet Theus also is charged with four counts of bank fraud. Diane Theus and Erica Abson Robins each have been charged with two counts of bank fraud. Janet Theus, Diane Theus, Erica Abson Robins, and Ronald Lee Robins are charged with one count of unlawful use of unauthorized access devices.

Janet Theus and Diane Theus surrendered to federal authorities today and are scheduled to be arraigned this afternoon in United States District Court in downtown Los Angeles.

Erica Abson Robins and Ronald Lee Robins were arrested Wednesday. Spears surrendered to federal authorities on Wednesday. All three of these defendants were arraigned and pleaded not guilty to all charges. An April 29 trial date was scheduled. Erica Robins and Spears were ordered released on \$10,000 bond. A detention hearing was scheduled for March 11 for Ronald Robins, who remains in federal custody.

According to the indictment returned February 12 and unsealed today, the defendants from April 2020 to July 2022 executed a scheme to collect and share personal information, including names and Social Security numbers, from individuals to fraudulently receive COVID-19 unemployment cash benefits. After collecting this personal information, the defendants submitted fraudulent COVID-19 unemployment assistance applications, falsely claiming that the applicants had lost jobs because of the pandemic. Janet Theus, Diane Theus, and Erica Robins then withdrew cash at ATMs from the job-loss cash assistance accounts they conspired to create.

The indictment further alleges that, in total, defendants caused at least approximately 293 applications for unemployment benefits to be filed, resulting in payouts of approximately \$3.3 million. Approximately 169 of the benefits applications the defendants caused to be filed were for children under the age of 18, approximately 106 of which were for children under the age of 10. The defendants also caused to be submitted at least 17 COVID-19 job-loss claims for individuals who were in fact incarcerated prisoners.

The indictment also alleges that Erica Robins used her position as a California Highway Patrol dispatcher to query a law enforcement database containing Social Security numbers and dates of birth regarding an inmate at the California Men's Colony state prison in San Luis Obispo, which was then used to obtain COVID-19 job-loss cash benefits. At the time, Erica Robins' husband, Ronald Robins, was an inmate at that same prison. While incarcerated, Robins collected Social Security numbers and dates of birth from other inmates, which Janet Theus and Diane Theus then used to withdraw COVID-19 job-loss cash benefits.

An indictment contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

If convicted of all charges, the defendants would face a statutory maximum sentence of 30 years in federal prison for each bank fraud-related count. Janet Theus, Diane Theus, Erica Robins, and Ronald Robins would face up to 10 years in federal prison for unlawful use of unauthorized access devices.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by, among other methods, augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement efforts. For more information on the department's response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

On September 15, 2022, the Attorney General selected the U.S. Attorney's Offices for the Central and Eastern Districts of California to jointly head one of three national COVID-19 Fraud Strike Force Teams. The Department of Justice established the Strike Force to enhance existing efforts to combat and prevent COVID-19 related financial fraud. The Strike Force combines law enforcement and prosecutorial resources and focuses on large-scale, multistate pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors, as well as those who committed multiple instances of pandemic relief fraud. The Strike Force uses prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds. Additional information regarding the Strike Force may be found at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-covid-19-fraud-strike-force-teams>.

Anyone with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice's National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline at (866) 720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

A number of law enforcement agencies are providing significant support, including the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG), the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security - Office of Inspector General (DHS-OIG), the U.S. Secret Service (USSS), California's Employment Development Department (EDD), California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), and County of San Luis Obispo - District Attorney's Office (SLODA).

Assistant United States Attorneys Diane B. Roldán and Matthew J. Tako of the General Crimes Section are prosecuting these cases.

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