

PRESS RELEASE

Former Social Security Employee Sentenced To 36 Months In Prison For Pandemic Fraud Scheme

Wednesday, April 3, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Pennsylvania

SCRANTON - The United States Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Pennsylvania announced that Takiyah Gordon Austin, age 47, formerly of Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, was sentenced to 36 months' imprisonment to be followed by three years of supervised release by U.S. District Court Judge Malachy E. Mannion, for a scheme to fraudulently obtain unemployment benefits related to COVID-19 emergency relief funds. Judge Mannion also ordered Austin to pay restitution in the amount of \$288,590.

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program was created by the March 27, 2020 CARES Act, as part of the United States government's efforts to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the public's health and economic well-being. The PUA program was designed to provide unemployment benefits to individuals not eligible for regular unemployment compensation or extended unemployment benefits.

According to U.S. Attorney Gerard M. Karam, Austin pleaded guilty to one count wire fraud and one count of aggravated identify theft. From in or about May 2020 to in or about May 2021, Austin, a claims specialist with the Social Security Administration, filed PUA claims for ineligible recipients in exchange for payment from the individuals. Additionally, Austin filed claims after accessing SSA databases to obtain the personal identifying information from unsuspecting individuals and then diverted the unemployment funds to addresses she controlled in order to use the funds for her own personal expenses. Through the scheme, Austin defrauded the government of over \$288,000.

The case was investigated by the Social Security Administration, Office of the Inspector General, the Department of Labor, Office of the Inspector General, and the United States

Postal Inspection Service. Special Assistant United States Attorney Megan Curran and Assistant United States Attorney Alisan V. Martin prosecuted the case.

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>.

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 Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

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Topic

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