

**Department of Justice**

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Massachusetts

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, November 4, 2021

## **Lawrence Woman Sentenced to Prison for Identity Theft and Unemployment Fraud Related to COVID-19 Pandemic**

BOSTON – A Lawrence woman was sentenced today in connection with her involvement in a scheme to fraudulently obtain COVID-19-related unemployment assistance.

Raquel Pena, 40, was sentenced by U.S. Senior District Court Judge William G. Young to three years in prison and one year of supervised release. Pena was also ordered to pay restitution for any money that the government is unable to recover from the fraudulent unemployment assistance, which is currently estimated at \$360,700. On July 15, 2021, Pena pleaded guilty to wire fraud and aggravated identity theft.

In March 2020, in response to the global coronavirus pandemic, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), which among other things, created a temporary federal unemployment insurance program called Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). The PUA program, which in Massachusetts was administered by the Department of Unemployment Assistance, provided unemployment insurance benefits for individuals who are not eligible for other types of unemployment benefits.

Pena possessed a notebook containing the names and personal information of others, which Pena and her co-conspirators used to file fraudulent PUA claims. Pena recruited acquaintances to receive the proceeds of the fraudulent claims into their bank accounts and give all or a portion of the cash to Pena. The investigation connected Pena and her co-conspirators to \$360,700 in unemployment claims paid between May 2020 and March 2021.

Acting United States Attorney Nathaniel R. Mendell; Joseph R. Bonavolonta, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Division; and Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent in Charge of Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Labor Racketeering and Fraud Investigations made the announcement today. The Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance provided assistance in the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Markham of Mendell's Securities, Financial & Cyber Fraud Unit 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 (NCDF) Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

**Topic(s):**  
Financial Fraud

**Component(s):**  
USAO - Massachusetts