



Department of Justice

**United States Attorney John C. Gurganus
Middle District of Pennsylvania**

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PIO CONTACT: Dawn Clark
WORK: (717) 221-4458
CELL: (717) 975-7128
EMAIL: Dawn.Clark2@usdoj.gov

LUZERNE COUNTY WOMAN SENTENCED FOR METHAMPHETAMINE TRAFFICKING AND PANDEMIC FRAUD OFFENSES

SCRANTON- The United States Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Pennsylvania announced today that Christina Covey, age 34, formerly of Drums, Pennsylvania, was sentenced by United States District Judge Malachy E. Mannion, to 48 months' imprisonment for methamphetamine trafficking, and 15 months' imprisonment for committing pandemic unemployment fraud, five months of which is to run consecutive to the methamphetamine trafficking sentence.

According to United States Attorney John C. Gurganus, on May 20, 2021, Covey pleaded guilty to conspiring with several other individuals to distribute and possess with intent to distribute between 1.5 and 5 kilograms of methamphetamine in the Hazleton area between October 2019 and February 2020. During the scheme, conspirators mailed parcels containing methamphetamine from Arizona to Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, for retrieval and distribution. Covey was involved in identifying and providing addresses of vacant houses to receive the parcels. On one occasion, she retrieved a parcel containing methamphetamine from a vacant house located on Sycamore Drive, in Drums, Pennsylvania.

The methamphetamine trafficking case was investigated by Homeland Security Investigations, the Postal Inspection Service, and the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office as part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.

Covey also pleaded guilty to committing pandemic unemployment fraud while on pretrial release for the federal narcotics charges. In that case, she filed false PUA applications on behalf of two federal inmates—her codefendant in both cases, Fredy Mendoza, and another inmate. The applications sought unemployment benefits for both inmates by claiming that they were laid off because of the COVID-19 pandemic and available to work, despite their incarceration on underlying federal drug trafficking charges. The conspirators subsequently filed false weekly certifications required to continue receiving PUA benefits, ultimately securing nearly \$30,000

dollars, which were mailed in debit cards to Covey. Covey used the majority of funds on gambling expenses, and was ordered to pay \$29,799 in restitution.

“Christina Covey engaged in a scheme with her co-defendant to defraud the PUA program by obtaining personal information from inmates in Lackawanna County Jail and submitting fraudulent claims for PUA benefits on behalf of those inmates even though they were incarcerated and not able and available to work. The U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General is grateful for our partnerships with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and our many law enforcement partners. We also want to thank the U.S. Attorney’s Office for their continued efforts to prosecute those who violate public benefit programs and commit fraud,” stated Syreeta Scott, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Philadelphia Region, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General.

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program was created by the March 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.

Fredy Mendoza remains in custody, pleaded guilty in the methamphetamine trafficking case, and awaits sentencing. Mendoza is pending trial in the pandemic unemployment fraud case.

The methamphetamine trafficking case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Jenny P. Roberts. The pandemic case was investigated by the Postal Inspection Service and by the Department of Labor, Office of the Inspector General, and was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Phillip J. Caraballo.

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>.

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