

PRESS RELEASE

New Jersey Man Convicted for Stealing COVID-19 Unemployment Benefits

Wednesday, October 30, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of New Jersey

TRENTON N.J. – A New York man was convicted for conspiring to illegally obtain over \$570,000 in COVID-19 unemployment benefits, U.S. Attorney Philip R. Sellinger announced today.

Jose Tavares, 37, of Englewood, New Jersey, was convicted on Oct. 28, 2024, on one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud. Tavares was convicted after a five-day jury trial before U.S. District Judge Robert Kirsch in Trenton federal court.

Tavares' conspirators, Yanira Abreu, 43, of Keasby, New Jersey, and Christopher Valerio, 34, of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, have each previously pleaded guilty and were sentenced by Judge Kirsch in the same scheme.

According to documents filed in this case:

From July 2020 through February 2021, Tavares, Valerio, Abreu and others submitted fraudulent applications for unemployment insurance benefits to the New York Department of Labor (NYDOL) through fictitious online profiles that they created using personally identifiable information, including names, dates of birth, and Social Security numbers, of other individuals without their consent. Once the NYDOL processed and approved the fraudulent applications, Tavares and his conspirators obtained debit cards with illegally obtained funds totaling over \$570,000, which they used for personal gain, including vacations, luxury retail purchases, and cosmetic surgery.

The wire fraud charge carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and a maximum fine of \$250,000, or twice the gross gain to the defendant or gross loss to the victim, whichever is greatest. Sentencing is scheduled for March 4, 2025.

U.S. Attorney Sellinger credited special agents of Homeland Security Investigations Newark, under the direction of Acting Special Agent in Charge Spiros Karabinas; special

agents of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Northeast Region, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone, and postal inspectors of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Christopher A. Nielsen, Philadelphia Division, with the investigation leading to the verdict.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Matthew Stark and Benjamin D. Bleiberg of the Economic Crimes Unit in Newark.

The District of New Jersey COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Strike Force is one of five strike forces established throughout the United States by the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate and prosecute COVID-19 fraud. The strike forces focus on large-scale, multi-state pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors. The strike forces are interagency law enforcement efforts, using prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams designed to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds.

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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