

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Western District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Organizer of Conspiracy that Defrauded Cares Act of Over \$1.5 Million in Unemployment Benefits Sentenced to 10 Years in Prison

ABINGDON, Va. – A Jonesville, Virginia woman, who admitted to heading a conspiracy that defrauded the government of more than \$1.5 million in pandemic-related unemployment benefits, was sentenced today to 10 years in federal prison and ordered to pay restitution.

Farren Gaddis Ricketts, 31, and her co-conspirators concocted a scheme to gather personal identification information and then submit unemployment claims to the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) website for individuals who were known to be ineligible to receive pandemic unemployment benefits, including various inmates in Virginia Department of Corrections facilities.

According to court documents, Ricketts developed a business entity called "Ricketts Advisory, LLC," registered it with the Virginia State Corporation Commission, and advertised as a financial services company that helped with filing pandemic unemployment claims.

In addition to receiving unemployment benefits herself, Ricketts charged fees to over 120 of her co-conspirator "clients" for the service of filing their fraudulent claims.

Between May 2020 and February 2021, Ricketts and her co-conspirators filed more than 150 fraudulent claims for pandemic unemployment benefits. For many of these filings, Ricketts created fraudulent documents to support the claims, including fraudulent IRS forms purporting to show pre-pandemic income.

"When Congress provided much needed financial assistance for those impacted by COVID-19, Farren Ricketts led a criminal conspiracy to steal more than \$1.5 million in pandemic-related unemployment benefits," U.S. Attorney Christopher R. Kavanaugh said today. "My Office will continue to lead the effort to prosecute those who stole money intended for those in legitimate need, and today's sentence reflects the seriousness of this offense and the impact it had on our communities. I am thankful to the IRS, DOL-OIG, the Russell County Sheriff's Office and the Norton Police Department for their work on this important investigation."

"Ricketts not only defrauded taxpayers herself, but she also helped dozens more criminals line their pockets with unemployment benefits meant for those truly in need," said Darrell Waldon, IRS-CI Special Agent in Charge, Washington DC Field Office. "Our special agents will continue to pursue COVID-19 related fraud and ensure those who commit it are brought to justice."

"Farren Ricketts and her co-conspirators profited from fraudulent claims for pandemic unemployment assistance (PUA) they filed for individuals they knew to be ineligible for PUA benefits. In furtherance of the scheme, Ricketts utilized her financial services business, Ricketts Advisory, LLC., to manage the filing of the fraudulent claims and to create fraudulent documentation to support the claims. The U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General is grateful for our partnerships with the Virginia Employment Commission and our many law-enforcement partners. We also 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, Philadelphia Region, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General.

The ongoing investigation is being conducted by The Department of Labor - Office of the Inspector General, the Internal Review Service - Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI), the Russell County Sheriff’s Office, and the Norton Police Department in Wise County are investigating the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel J. Murphy is prosecuting 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>.

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