

AG Shapiro Charges Five Out-of-State Residents for Defrauding PA's Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program

Defendants Alleged to Have Submitted More Than \$925K in False Pandemic Unemployment Claims

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HARRISBURG – Attorney General Josh Shapiro announced today that financial crimes agents from the Office of Attorney General, in coordination with federal and local law enforcement, arrested five individuals for allegedly conspiring to provide false information in an attempt to illegally obtain Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act. Three targets are expected to be charged within the next week and one remains at large.

“This program was designed to help people get back on their feet after the severe disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said AG Josh Shapiro. “These defendants instead targeted Pennsylvania’s program to rip off our residents and took advantage of the public health emergency to cash in. We will continue to work with our partners to hold these scammers accountable to the law, and ensure that our unemployment benefits are going to those that need them.”

The investigation showed nine individuals conspired to illegally obtain PUA funds in excess of \$925,000. The following individuals were named in criminal complaints filed in the Pennsylvania Courts of Common Pleas and arrested today by the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General:

Regine Ford, 26, of Newark, DE

John Rivers III, 35, of Loganville, GA

Jose Thomas, 43, of Sicklerville, NJ

Shammiere Lackey, 28, of Pennsville, NJ

Adrian Hambrick, 38, of Salem, NJ

“When fraud schemes affect public funds – as this one allegedly did – the FBI will work in any capacity, across any platform or jurisdiction, when asked to support the effort to investigate, capture, and prosecute scammers,” said Special Agent in Charge Jacqueline Maguire. “The message should be clear – if you defraud the government and, by extension, your fellow citizens for your own personal gain, don’t be surprised when the FBI is knocking on your door.”

Through the course of the investigation, agents learned that seven of the defendants allegedly claimed to have worked for the same trucking company between January 2020 and March 2020, and claimed that their employment ended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon further investigation, prosecutors allege that these individuals did not work for this company nor had any record of being employed in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

“An important part of the mission of the Office of Inspector General is to investigate allegations involving unemployment insurance fraud. We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to investigate these types of allegations,” said Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent-in-Charge, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General.

“These arrests reflect our continued resolve to investigate and prosecute those who try to exploit a national emergency to steal taxpayer-funded resources by using the global pandemic as an opportunity to steal from hard working citizens,” said Michael Montanez, Special Agent in Charge IRS Criminal Investigation Newark Field Office. “IRS Special Agents are committed to working with our law enforcement partners to aggressively uncover and disrupt criminals who conspire to abuse these programs for personal gain.”

The alleged co-conspirators are believed to have filed 145 false applications, many of which using a Chester address, that resulted in \$925,273 in allegedly false unemployment claims, \$455,513 of which was paid out to these defendants.

To date, the Office of Attorney General has charged 44 individuals, including 24 inmates and their accomplices, across the Commonwealth for submitting fraudulent PUA applications amounting to more than \$4 million in fraudulent PUA funds.

Individuals who apply for emergency unemployment benefits when they are employed or incarcerated are breaking federal and state law. Individuals found to be involved with organized efforts to obtain emergency unemployment benefits illegally can face significant prison time and financial penalties.

This case is being prosecuted by Pennsylvania Deputy Attorney General Suzanne Edwards. The FBI, IRS, the U.S Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, and the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry provided significant assistance in this investigation. All charges discussed are accusations. The defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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