

PRESS RELEASE

Rhode Island Man Pleads Guilty to Unemployment Fraud Scheme Related to COVID-19 Pandemic

Friday, April 28, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Massachusetts

BOSTON – A Rhode Island man pleaded guilty yesterday in federal court in Boston in connection with a fraudulent scheme to obtain over \$450,000 in COVID-19-related unemployment assistance.

Dquintz Alexander, 36, of Cranston, R.I., pleaded guilty to five counts of wire fraud, one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft. U.S. District Court Judge Angel Kelley scheduled sentencing for Aug. 10, 2023. Alexander was charged and arrested in November 2021.

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.

Alexander participated in a scheme that obtained over \$450,000 in proceeds from fraudulent PUA claims submitted between April and June 2020 in Massachusetts. Alexander and co-conspirator Norman Higgs opened bank accounts to receive payments on the fraudulent PUA claims. Alexander and Higgs also used various methods to conceal their involvement in the scheme, including Virtual Private Network (VPN) services, overseas email accounts and phone numbers from Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services.

In September 2021, Higgs pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud conspiracy and is scheduled to be sentenced on June 15, 2023.

The charges of wire fraud and conspiracy to commit wire fraud each provide for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000 or twice the gross gain or loss, whichever is greater. The charge of aggravated identity theft provides for a mandatory sentence of two years in prison to be served consecutively to any other sentence imposed. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and statutes which govern the determination of a sentence in a criminal case.

United States Attorney Rachael S. Rollins; Joseph R. Bonavolonta, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Division; and Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent in Charge of the Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Labor Racketeering and Fraud Investigations, made the announcement today. The Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance provided valuable assistance with the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Markham of Rollins' Securities, Financial & Cyber Fraud Unit 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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