

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, March 14, 2022

Southwest Virginia Man Sentenced in Unemployment Benefits Scam

ABINGDON, Va. – A Southwest Virginia man, who conspired with more than 30 others in a scheme to illegally obtain pandemic unemployment benefits, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to defraud the government, and one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud, and was sentenced last week to 30 months in federal prison.

Over the course of nine months, Jacob Hunter Hicks, 35 of Lebanon, VA, conspired with Leelynn Danielle Chytka, Gregory Marcus Tackett, Jeffery Ryan Tackett, and others to file fraudulent claims with the Virginia Employment Commission on behalf of at least 37 otherwise-ineligible individuals, with a total actual loss to the United States of at least \$499,000.

U.S. Attorney Christopher R. Kavanaugh of the Western District of Virginia, Syreeta Scott, Special Agent-in-Charge, Philadelphia Regional Office, U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General, and Special Agent in Charge Darrell J. Waldon of the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation Washington, D.C., Field Office made the announcement.

The Department of Labor - Office of the Inspector General, the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation Washington, D.C., Field Office, the Norton Police Department, and the Russell County Sheriff's Office investigated the case.

Assistant United States Attorneys Daniel J. Murphy and Michael Baudinet prosecuted 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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