

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Western District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Southwest Virginia Man Sentenced to 57 Months for Role in Massive Pandemic Unemployment Fraud Scheme

ABINGDON, Va. – A Southwest Virginia man who conspired with at least thirty others in a scheme to defraud the government of more than \$499,000 in pandemic unemployment benefits was sentenced today to nearly five years in federal prison.

Wesley William Hickman, 25, of Big Stone Gap, was convicted along with co-defendant Marissa Kiser, 28, of Castlewood, following a jury trial in March 2022. The jury found each guilty of conspiracy to defraud the United States, fraud in connection with emergency benefits, conspiracy to commit mail fraud, mail fraud in connection with emergency benefits, and aggravated identity theft.

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Hickman and Kiser conspired with Leelynn Danielle Chytka, Gregory Marcus Elmer Tackett, Jeffery Ryan Tackett, and others to commit fraud against the United States in connection with the filing of fraudulent claims for pandemic unemployment benefits. At the time of his involvement in the scheme, Hickman was incarcerated at the Southwest Virginia Regional Jail and was not entitled to pandemic unemployment assistance. However, Hickman and other jail inmates provided their personal information to Jeffrey Tackett for the purpose of filing fraudulent claims. Kiser provided her personal information to her friend Chytka, the ringleader of this widespread conspiracy, for the purpose of filing a fraudulent claim on her behalf.

Over the course of nine months, members of the conspiracy filed fraudulent claims with the Virginia Employment Commission on behalf of at least 37 individuals, with a total actual loss to the United States of at least \$499,000.

United States Attorney Christopher R. Kavanaugh of the Western District of Virginia, Syreeta Scott, Special Agent-in-Charge, Philadelphia Region, 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. 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.

Component(s):

USAO - Virginia, Western