

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Eastern District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, July 28, 2021

Virginia Inmate Pleads Guilty to Involvement in Pandemic Unemployment Benefits Scheme

NORFOLK, Va. – A Virginia inmate pleaded guilty today to his involvement in a scheme to obtain pandemic-related unemployment benefits by using the personal identifying information of over 30 other Virginia prison inmates.

According to court documents, in 2020, Michael Lee Lewis, Jr., 41, of Chesapeake, was incarcerated at the Augusta Correctional Center. Beginning in May 2020, he worked with Mary Landon Benton, 38, of Portsmouth, and Angelica Cartwright-Powers, 35, of Norfolk to collect the personally identifiable information of other inmates to fraudulently apply for Virginia unemployment benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lewis provided Benton and Cartwright-Powers information for inmates at the Augusta Correctional Center, resulting in approximately twenty-one successful unemployment claims for inmates there. Benton, with the help of Lewis and the others, submitted successful applications for Virginia unemployment benefits for 31 inmates, and Cartwright-Powers submitted successful applications for four inmates.

Lewis and his co-conspirators, along with the prisoners whose information was used for the unemployment applications, shared the proceeds of the crimes, which amounted to over \$330,000. Although the conspirators initially obtained \$436,834, the Virginia Employment Commission was able to reclaim some of the disbursed funds after discovering the fraud.

Benton and Cartwright-Powers have since pleaded guilty to their respective roles in the conspiracy. Lewis pleaded guilty to one count of mail fraud and is scheduled to be sentenced on December 2. He faces a maximum penalty of 30 years in prison. Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after taking into account the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Raj Parekh, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia; Joseph V. Cuffari, Inspector General for the Department of Homeland Security; Derek Pickle, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Washington, DC Regional Office, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General; and Paul Haymes, Chief of Investigations, Virginia Department of Corrections, Special Investigations Unit, made the announcement after U.S. District Judge Raymond A. Jackson accepted the plea.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Rebecca Gantt is prosecuting the case.

This investigation was conducted under the auspices of "Operation Checkmate," the Virginia Department of Corrections Inmate Unemployment Insurance Fraud Task Force. The task force is led by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia, DOL-OIG, DHS-OIG, and the Virginia Department of Corrections. This investigation included assistance from the U.S. Secret Service's Richmond Field Office, the Portsmouth Police Department, and the Virginia Employment Commission.

On May 17, 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>.

A copy of this press release is located on the website of the [U.S. Attorney's Office](#) for the Eastern District of Virginia. Related court documents and information are located on the website of the [District Court](#) for the Eastern District of Virginia or on [PACER](#) by searching for Case No. 2:21-cr-33.

Topic(s):

Coronavirus
Financial Fraud

Component(s):

[USAO - Virginia, Eastern](#)

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