

Georgia Woman Sentenced to 12 Years in Prison for \$30M COVID-19 Unemployment Fraud Scheme and Firearms Charge

Friday, October 25, 2024

For Immediate Release

Office of Public Affairs

A Georgia woman was sentenced yesterday for her role in a scheme to defraud the Georgia Department of Labor (GaDOL) out of tens of millions of dollars in benefits meant to assist unemployed individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tyshion Nautese Hicks, 32, of Vienna, was sentenced to 12 years in prison, three years of supervised release, and ordered to pay restitution in an amount to be determined at a later date. Hicks' total sentence includes a penalty of three consecutive years in prison, imposed yesterday in relation to a separate charge of illegal possession of a machine gun prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Georgia.

According to court documents and evidence presented in court, from March 2020 through November 2022, Hicks and her co-conspirators caused more than 5,000 fraudulent unemployment insurance (UI) claims to be filed with the GaDOL, resulting in at least \$30 million in stolen benefits.

"In one of the largest COVID fraud schemes ever prosecuted, the defendant and her coconspirators filed more than 5,000 fraudulent COVID unemployment insurance claims using stolen identities and unlawfully obtained more than \$30 million in benefits," said Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Nicole M. Argentieri, head of the Justice Department's Criminal Division. "In doing so, the defendant and her co-conspirators exploited a program designed to alleviate pandemic-related economic hardship to enrich themselves at the expense of federal taxpayers. Yesterday's sentence underscores the department's commitment to investigating and prosecuting those who steal from the public fisc."

To execute the scheme, Hicks and others created fictitious employers and fabricated lists of purported employees using personally identifiable information (PII) from thousands of identity theft victims and filed fraudulent unemployment insurance claims on the GaDOL website. The co-conspirators obtained

PII for use in the scheme from a variety of sources, including by paying an employee of an Atlanta-area health care and hospital network to unlawfully obtain patients' PII from the hospital's databases, and by purchasing PII from other sources over the internet. Using victims' PII, Hicks and her co-conspirators caused the stolen UI funds to be disbursed via prepaid debit cards mailed to addresses of their choice, many of which were in and around Cordele and Vienna. Hicks additionally paid a local U.S. Postal Service (USPS) carrier to unlawfully divert mail containing debit cards loaded with over \$512,000 in fraud proceeds to her and coached another co-conspirator on how to create her own fictitious employer account via Facebook Messenger.

In February, Hicks pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft. Seven of Hicks' co-conspirators have previously pleaded guilty or been sentenced in the investigation.

"Tyshion Nautese Hicks and her co-conspirators used the stolen PII of unwitting victims to file numerous fraudulent claims for UI benefits with the Georgia Department of Labor," said Special Agent in Charge Mathew Broadhurst of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG) Southeast Regional Office. "We will continue to work with our federal and state law enforcement partners to safeguard UI benefit programs for those who need them."

"The sentence received by the defendant is the outcome of IRS Criminal Investigation's commitment to investigating and prosecuting those who attempt to defraud various agencies by filing fraudulent claims using another person's identifying information," said Special Agent in Charge Demetrius Hardeman of the IRS Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI) Atlanta Field Office.

"Postal Inspectors will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to hold individuals accountable for engaging in fraudulent schemes to manipulate the COVID-19 program for their own financial gain," said Inspector in Charge Tommy D. Coke of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) Atlanta Division. "The sentencing should serve as a deterrence and shows that this type of behavior will not be tolerated."

"Yesterday's sentencing underlines our commitment to holding those who exploit federal relief programs for personal gain accountable," said Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Ulrich of the USPS Office of Inspector General (USPS-OIG). "As proven in this case, our criminal investigators along with our law enforcement partners will work together and diligently pursue anyone who attempts to exploit programs created to help legitimate people and businesses affected by the global pandemic."

"Hicks chose to commit fraud, further depleting limited funds designated to help individuals struggling to survive during the pandemic," said Special Agent in Charge Frederick D. Houston of the U.S. Secret Service (USSS) Atlanta Field Office. "She and her co-conspirators also stole the personally identifiable information, caring only about self-enrichment, not the lives adversely affected. This case signifies our commitment to protect citizens and businesses from fraud and identity theft. We will continue to work

with our local, state, and federal law enforcement partners to prosecute those who abuse these programs.”

“Homeland Security Investigations will aggressively pursue those who exploit unemployment benefits meant for those in need, ensuring that justice is served, and resources are preserved for legitimate claimants,” said Acting Special Agent in Charge Steven N. Schrank of the Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Atlanta Office.

“Yesterday’s sentencing sends a clear message that those committing fraud will be held accountable,” said Inspector General Joseph V. Cuffari of the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General (DHS-OIG). “DHS-OIG and our law enforcement partners will continue to prioritize protecting our country from these kinds of schemes.”

DOL-OIG, IRS-CI, USPS-OIG, USPIS, USSS, HSI, and DHS-OIG investigated the case.

Trial Attorneys Lyndie Freeman, Siji Moore, Matthew Kahn, and Andrew Jaco of the Criminal Division’s Fraud Section prosecuted the fraud case.

On May 17, 2021, Attorney General Merrick B. Garland established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Justice Department 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, 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 www.justice.gov/coronavirus.

Anyone with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Justice Department’s National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form.

Updated October 25, 2024