



Office of Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Labor

OIG Investigations Newsletter

December 1, 2021–January 31, 2022
Volume XXXVIII

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) is pleased to present the *OIG Investigations Newsletter*, containing a bimonthly summary of selected investigative accomplishments.

The OIG conducts criminal, civil, and administrative investigations into alleged violations of federal laws relating to DOL programs, operations, and personnel. In addition, the OIG conducts criminal investigations to combat the influence of labor racketeering and organized crime in the nation's labor unions in three areas: employee benefit plans, labor-management relations, and internal union affairs.

Virginia Woman Responsible for Defrauding the Federal Government of More than \$1.5 Million in Unemployment Benefits Sentenced to 120 Months in Prison

On December 17, 2021, Farren Ricketts was sentenced to 120 months in prison and 36 months supervised release due to her June 21, 2021, guilty plea to conspiracy to defraud the United States, mail fraud conspiracy, and aggravated identity theft.

Ricketts and her co-conspirators concocted a scheme to gather personal identifiable information and then submit unemployment insurance (UI) benefit claims to the Virginia Employment Commission for individuals who were known to be ineligible to receive such benefits, including various inmates in Virginia Department of Corrections facilities.

Ricketts established a business, "Ricketts Advisory, LLC.", and advertised it as a financial services company that helped with filing pandemic-related UI benefit claims. In addition to receiving UI benefits herself, Ricketts charged fees to over 120 of her co-conspirator "clients" for the service of filing their fraudulent claims. Between May 2020 and February 2021, Ricketts and her co-conspirators filed more than 150 fraudulent claims for pandemic-related unemployment benefits. Ricketts created fraudulent documents to support the claims, including fraudulent IRS forms purporting to show pre-pandemic income for many of these filings.

This is a joint investigation with the IRS-Criminal Investigation Division (IRS-CI); the Norton, Virginia Police Department; and the Russell County, Virginia, Sheriff's Office. *United States v. Farren Ricketts* (W.D. Virginia)

Virginia Inmate Sentenced to 115 Months in Prison for Involvement in Pandemic Unemployment Benefits Scheme

On January 13, 2022, Michael Lee Lewis Jr. was sentenced to 115 months in federal prison for his involvement in a scheme to obtain pandemic-related UI benefits by using the personal identifying information (PII) of more than 30 Virginia prison inmates. Lewis was

also ordered to pay more than \$227,000 in restitution and forfeit \$5,000 seized during the investigation.

In 2020, Lewis was incarcerated at the Augusta Correctional Center in Craigsville, Virginia. Beginning in May 2020, he worked with co-conspirators to collect the PII of other inmates to fraudulently apply for Virginia UI benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lewis provided his co-conspirators with information for fellow inmates at the Augusta Correctional Center, which resulted in the filing of more than 20 fraudulent UI claims using the names and identifiers of those inmates, who were not eligible to collect UI benefits. Lewis and his co-conspirators, along with the prisoners whose information was used in the fraudulent UI claim applications, shared the proceeds of the crimes, which amounted to more than \$330,000.

This is a joint investigation with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security–OIG and the Virginia Department of Corrections. *United States v. Mary Landon Benton et al.* (E.D. Virginia)

Former NFL Wide Receiver Sentenced After Pleading Guilty to Charges of Aggravated Identity Theft and Access Device Fraud for His Role in a Scheme to Defraud the State of California Employment Development Department

On January 6, 2022, Kenbrell Thompkins was sentenced to 25 months in prison after pleading guilty to one count of access device fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft. A preliminary order of forfeiture was entered, ordering Thompkins to forfeit the \$6,000 previously seized from Thompkins' residence by law enforcement.

In August and September 2020, Thompkins used the Social Security numbers and personal identifiable information of unsuspecting Florida residents to obtain pandemic-related unemployment insurance benefits in the form of prepaid debit cards from California. Thompkins then withdrew thousands of dollars from such cards via ATMs. Thompkins researched internet tutorials for the application of UI benefits in states outside of Florida. There were more than 10 victims of Thompkins' scheme.

This was a joint investigation with the Aventura Police Department. *United States v. Kenbrell Thompkins* (S.D. Florida)

Two Michigan Residents Plead Guilty to UI Fraud Scheme

On December 8, 2021, Mitchacole Johnson and Larry Witherspoon pleaded guilty to wire fraud for filing more than 66 fraudulent UI claims that defrauded multiple states of more than \$1.3 million, with attempted fraud nearing \$3.5 million. Johnson filed a number of claims in her own name, while Witherspoon filed multiple claims in the names of people who had names similar to his own. Both Johnson and Witherspoon filed their claims using other people's Social Security numbers and had the benefits deposited into a variety of bank accounts they controlled, some connected to pre-paid debit cards.

This is a joint investigation with the FBI and the Michigan UI Agency. *United States v. Mitchacole Johnson and Larry Witherspoon* (E.D. Michigan)

Louisiana Woman Pleads Guilty to UI Fraud

On December 15, 2021, Lestreonia Rodrigue pleaded guilty to mail fraud for her role in a scheme to defraud the California Employment Development Department (CA EDD) out of more than \$500,000 in unemployment insurance benefits.

From approximately July 2020 through June 2021, Rodrigue used her name as well as the names of other individuals, with and without their consent, to file for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance in multiple states, including California. During the same period, Rodrigue submitted claims for benefits under the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) in the names of fictitious businesses and based on fictitious business profits and losses. Rodrigue received more than \$20,000 in fraudulent PPP benefits from the Small Business Administration.

This is a joint investigation with the FBI. *United States v. Lestreonia Renee Rodrigue* (M.D. Louisiana)

Miami Man Pleads Guilty for Role in Unemployment Fraud Scheme

On January 18, 2022, Gregory Bon, the last of four defendants in this investigation, pleaded guilty to his role in a fraud scheme that sought to defraud the CA EDD of almost \$500,000 in UI benefits. Three other co-defendants, Bonia Bon, Bonize Bon, and Eldia Dieujuste, were previously sentenced to federal prison for their participation in this scheme.

From January 2018 through June 2019, the Bons and Dieujuste used the personal information of California residents to file 34 fraudulent UI benefit claims totaling over \$494,000 in UI benefits. The Bons and Dieujuste provided their own home addresses in Florida as the mailing addresses for the fraudulent UI benefit claims. ATM surveillance captured images of the Bons and Dieujuste using the fraudulently obtained UI debit cards to withdraw the UI benefits in cash.

This is a joint investigation with the U. S. Postal Inspection Service and CA EDD. *United States v. Bon et al.* (C.D. California)

Virginia Resident Pleads Guilty to \$460,000 Pandemic Unemployment Fraud Scheme

On December 9, 2021, Rochelle Noel pleaded guilty to mail fraud for her role in a Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) fraud scheme in Virginia. Noel admitted that she filed fraudulent PUA claims on behalf of at least 22 inmates in the custody of the Virginia Department of Corrections, which resulted in a loss of more than \$460,000.

As part of the scheme, Noel collected personal identifiable information from inmates via telephone communications, which she then used to submit fraudulent claims to the Commonwealth of Virginia for PUA benefits on behalf of the inmates, who were not eligible to receive the benefits. The investigation revealed that Noel further directed the debit cards associated with the fraudulent claims be mailed using the U. S. Postal Service (USPS).

United States v. Rochelle Noel (E.D. Virginia)

Nigerian National Pleads Guilty to Pandemic UI and Elder Fraud Schemes

On December 20, 2021, Oluwaseyi Akinyemi pleaded guilty to mail fraud for his role in a pandemic-related UI fraud scheme and a separate social media advanced fee fraud scheme that targeted elderly victims.

Beginning in 2020, Akinyemi and other co-conspirators, filed fraudulent UI claims under the names of living and deceased victims and used his Maryland residence, as well as the home address of a Washington, D.C. client for whom Akinyemi provided at-home nursing care, as the mailing addresses to receive the UI debit cards associated with the fraudulent claims. In total, Akinyemi and his co-conspirators used the identities of 19 individuals to file fraudulent UI claims with multiple states, including Maryland, which caused an intended loss of \$250,000.

In a separate scheme, from July 10, 2018 to April 29, 2019, Akinyemi and at least one co-conspirator engaged in a social media–based elder fraud scheme. Members of the conspiracy targeted elderly victims on social media platforms, impersonating victims’ friends in order to vouch for their fraudulent financial scheme and convince the victim to send money in hopes of receiving a financial reward. As part of the scheme to defraud, the conspiracy members presented themselves as agents of real and fictitious government programs that offered supposed financial benefits to qualifying individuals.

This is a joint investigation with Homeland Security Investigations. *United States v. Oluwaseyi Akinyemi* (D. Maryland)

Michigan Woman Pleads Guilty to Pandemic-Related UI Fraud Scheme

On January 18, 2022, Mykia King pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft for filing approximately 34 fraudulent Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) benefit claims.

In furtherance of the fraud scheme, King submitted fraudulent PUA claims in the names of multiple individuals who did not provide King authorization or consent to do so. King submitted adulterated identification documents as proof of identification for her fraudulent PUA claims. This included submitting fraudulent driver’s license photos and Social Security cards for multiple claims and altering the names and addresses for the claims. The funds associated with King’s fraudulent claims were typically loaded onto debit cards and mailed to addresses King controlled.

This is a joint investigation with the United States Secret Service and the IRS-CI. *United States v. Mykia King* (E.D. Michigan)

Nebraska Railcar Cleaning Services and Owners Sentenced Following Guilty Pleas to Violating Environmental and Worker Safety Laws Related to Workers’ 2015 Deaths

On January 14, 2022, Nebraska Railcar Cleaning Services LLC (NRCS), as well as its president and owner, Steven Braithwaite, and its vice president and co-owner, Adam Braithwaite, were sentenced in Omaha, Nebraska. NRCS was sentenced to 60 months’ probation and fined \$21,000. Adam Braithwaite was sentenced to 12 months and 1 day in prison and \$100,000 in restitution. Steven Braithwaite was sentenced to 30 months in prison and \$100,000 in restitution.

The sentencing was a result of guilty pleas stemming from an investigation into an April 2015 fatal railcar explosion that killed two workers and injured a third. The charges include conspiracy, violating worker safety standards resulting in worker deaths, violating the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, and submitting false documents to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

NRCS was in the business of cleaning railcars, which often involved NRCS sending workers inside the cars' tanks to scrape and remove various fuel residual products, including highly flammable compounds such as benzene. Prior to the April 2015 explosion, OSHA officials conducted inspections and notified NRCS that it was in violation of safety regulations concerning confined space entries. Steven Braithwaite ultimately entered into a written agreement with OSHA, in which he represented that NRCS had been testing for benzene since July 2014. Adam Braithwaite also submitted falsified documents to OSHA purporting to show that NRCS had been purchasing equipment to test the contents of railcars for benzene and had taken other required safety precautions, though NRCS had not actually taken those steps.

In 2015, NRCS received an inquiry from one of its customers about cleaning product residue from a rail tanker car that contained a highly flammable product and benzene. NRCS responded that it could clean the railcar. However, NRCS did not test the tanker car's benzene as required. On April 14, 2015, approximately one hour after two employees were sent into the tanker to complete the cleaning job, its contents ignited and exploded, killing both employees and injuring a third.

This was a joint investigation with the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency Criminal Investigation Division. *United States v. Nebraska Railcar Cleaning Services* (D. Nebraska)

Philadelphia Business Owner Convicted at Trial of Bribing an OSHA Inspector

On December 13, 2021, Tony Ren, owner of Hua Da Construction, was convicted at trial of two counts of bribing a public official from OSHA. In September 2021, Ren was charged in an indictment with two counts of bribery. The charges arose from Ren's attempts to bribe an OSHA compliance safety and health officer.

In October 2017, an OSHA official conducted an inspection of a construction worksite in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in response to an imminent hazard report. During the inspection, the official observed numerous violations of OSHA standards including debris in passageways, electrical issues, holes in the floor, and gas tanks with broken pressure gauges. On two separate dates in November 2017, Ren offered cash bribes to the OSHA official in exchange for the official falsifying the inspection results and agreeing not to report the violations so that Ren could avoid the substantial financial penalties that would follow.

This is a joint investigation with the OSHA. *United States v. Ren* (E.D. Pennsylvania)

New Jersey Man Admits to Conspiring with Brother, an OSHA Compliance Officer, to Extort Contractors

On December 21, 2021, Paul Idrovo pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit an act of extortion under color of his brother's position as a compliance safety and health officer (CHSO) with OSHA. Paul Idrovo was previously charged in September 2020, along with his brother, Alvaro Idrovo, with conspiring to commit an offense against the United States based on the extortion of a New Jersey contractor.

According to court documents and statements made in open court, while acting in an official capacity as an OSHA CHSO, Alvaro Idrovo misrepresented to contractors in New Jersey that they were facing significant OSHA fines and penalties if they did not obtain OSHA safety training from a specific individual. Alvaro Idrovo would provide the contractors with the phone number for the required trainer, allegedly named “Jose Diaz” or “Paul Mejia”, when in fact the phone number actually belonged to Paul Idrovo, posing under these names to conceal the brothers’ relationship.

In furtherance of their fraud scheme, the brothers, who initially demanded higher sums of cash, ultimately charged the contractors \$4,000 to \$6,000 each for the safety training. Paul Idrovo collected the cash and provided the contractors with fraudulent computer-generated safety and health certificates that falsely stated the employees had received OSHA-certified safety training from “Jose Diaz” and “Paul Mejia.” Paul Idrovo shared portions of the extortion payments with Alvaro Idrovo.

This is a joint investigation with the FBI. *United States v. Alvaro Idrovo et al.* (D. New Jersey)

Houston Clinic Owner Sentenced in Illegal Kickback and Money Laundering Scheme

On January 6, 2022, Anurag Dass, aka Anna Dass, was sentenced to 24 months in prison and ordered to pay more than \$2.2 million in restitution.

Dass operated A&A Pain and Wellness Center, Inc. (A&A), located in Houston, Texas, along with her brother Anukul Dass, aka Andy Dass. Anna Dass admitted that she submitted or caused others to file false claims with the Office of Workers’ Compensation Programs (OWCP) for patients that Stephen Hunt directed to the clinic. Hunt was a former employee of the U.S. Postal Service who was injured on the job and filed his own claim with OWCP.

The Dass siblings conspired with Hunt, causing him to direct injured federal workers to the center for medical treatment and health care services. Hunt received referral fees based on the type and amount of services the federal worker, or claimant, received from A&A. Hunt also charged injured federal workers whom he had referred to A&A a fee for his representation and services through a company he controlled under the name Zentec.

Hunt and Andy Dass were previously convicted for their roles in the scheme, each pleading guilty to illegal kickbacks.

This was a joint investigation with USPS-OIG. *United States v. Anurag Dass, a/k/a Anna Dass* (S.D. Texas)

Career Coach Sentenced to Two Years in Prison for Stealing More than \$68,000 from Workforce Development Program

On January 6, 2022, Jessica Miller was sentenced to 24 months in prison and ordered to pay over \$71,000 in restitution to DOL and a financial institution after pleading guilty to wire fraud for defrauding the federal government.

From July 2016 to November 2019, Jessica Miller was employed as a career coach to provide training to job seekers, using federal funds made available by DOL under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

As a career coach, Miller was responsible for providing career guidance, case management, and follow-up to participants in the youth program. Miller previously admitted in court that, while serving as a career coach, she engaged in a scheme to divert government funds for her own benefit.

Among other schemes, Miller created fraudulent documents that falsely indicated that qualified individuals had made reimbursable purchases and were seeking reimbursement for those costs. Miller then submitted the fraudulent documents and cashed the reimbursement checks. Miller also created and submitted fraudulent documents, which included students' forged signatures, indicating that students had successfully completed certain milestones that entitled them to gift cards, which Miller retained for herself.

To further perpetuate the scheme, Miller opened bank and other accounts in the names of students without their knowledge and consent and used those accounts to cash the fraudulent reimbursement checks. In total, Miller defrauded at least 40 individuals and diverted more than \$68,000 in government funds for her own personal enrichment.

This was a joint investigation with the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations and Conover Police Department. *United States v. Jessica Anne Miller* (W.D. North Carolina)

Three Members of Robles Park Criminal Enterprise Plead Guilty to Racketeering and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Fraud

In December 2021 and January 2022, three members of the Robles Park criminal enterprise, pleaded guilty to numerous charges including racketeering conspiracy, conspiracy to commit fraud, and aggravated identity theft. Robles Park is a criminal organization whose members and associates engaged in acts involving murder, assault, intimidation, narcotics trafficking, access device fraud, identity theft, obstruction of justice, and other crimes.

Tywon Spann, Kareem Spann and Eriaus Bentley conspired to conduct and participate in the conduct of the affairs of the criminal enterprise through a pattern of racketeering activity to include narcotics trafficking, wire fraud, and identity theft. The three defendants admitted to unlawfully obtaining the PII of others in order to submit false applications for UI benefits. Over \$420,000 in unemployment benefits was paid to Robles Park members in the form of bank debit cards issued in the names of victims who did not give their PII or permission to use their PII.

This investigation is currently ongoing and is being worked jointly with the FBI and the Tampa, Florida Police Department. *United States v. Kareem Spann, United States v. Tywon Spann, United States v. Eriaus Bentley* (M.D. Florida)