

PRESS RELEASE

Seattle man who defrauded relief programs of more than \$1 million sentenced to 8+ years in prison

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For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Washington

Stole identities of real people, creating chaos and hardship for them and pandemic relief systems

Seattle – A former Seattle resident who defrauded federal COVID-19 benefit programs of more than \$1 million was sentenced today to 100 months in prison for wire fraud and aggravated identity theft, announced U.S. Attorney Nick Brown. Bryan Alan Sparks, 42, was indicted for the fraud scheme in November 2021 and pleaded guilty January 20, 2023. At the sentencing hearing, U.S. District Judge James L. Robart said, Sparks was “a serial thief and a fraudster – one of the more successful ones.... I am appalled by the damage Mr. Sparks has done.”

“People such as Mr. Sparks took advantage of the public and our government at the height of a crisis, and I’m glad to see him held accountable for the damage he caused,” said U.S. Attorney Nick Brown. “The harm goes beyond depleting government funds – his use of other people’s identities has damaged the victims and will continue to cause problems for them into the future.”

According to records filed in the case, from March 2020 until at least January 2021, Sparks and a coconspirator used stolen personal information of more than 50 Washington residents and businesses to apply for Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) from the Small Business Administration (SBA) and unemployment benefits from the Washington Employment Security Department (ESD). Sparks and his coconspirator obtained approximately \$521,900 from SBA and \$519,700 from ESD. Sparks opened fraudulent bank accounts to receive the benefits and had unemployment benefit debit cards mailed to a variety of addresses in the Seattle area where he could retrieve them. In all, Sparks attempted to obtain at least \$1.98 million in federally funded payments.

Sparks used the identities of real people and, in some instances, actual small businesses to open bank and credit accounts. The victims suffered significant harm. One person saw his credit score drop 200 points because of the seven credit and bank accounts opened in his name. The victim's impact statement stated that the financial toll of Sparks' crimes included being unable to execute his plan to start a business and invest in real estate. He believes that these consequences will be lasting for "years to come."

Another victim wrote about spending hours on the phone with law enforcement reporting the identity theft. "This fraud has changed me and will always cause me to have concern for my safety and for my family's safety . . . This is something that I would never want anyone else to have to deal with. It is not a good feeling, and this is how it will be."

In September 2020, law enforcement linked Sparks to lock boxes seized in Portland, Oregon. When the safes were searched, officers seized more than \$65,000 in cash and a number of debit cards.

Assistant United States Attorney Cindy Chang wrote in her sentencing memo, "During a nine-month period, despite multiple encounters and seizures by law enforcement in multiple states, Sparks possessed at least 46 cell phones, 14 laptops, multiple credit card skimmers, countless bank and identification cards in identities other than Sparks..., and various other sophisticated devices used for identity theft."

In all, Sparks was ordered to pay \$1,041,661 in restitution to the government programs. He will be on supervised release for five years following the prison term.

"Bryan Sparks caused substantial harm to individuals by stealing their identities and misusing Social Security numbers," said Gail Ennis, Inspector General for the Social Security Administration. "This sentence of 100 months holds Sparks accountable for his actions. I thank our law enforcement partners for their invaluable work on this case and the U.S. Attorney's Office for prosecuting this case."

The investigation of this case is led by the Social Security Administration, Office of the Inspector General (SSA-OIG) and U.S. Postal Inspection Service, with partners: Colusa County Sheriff's Office (CA); Washington State Employment Security Department; Small Business Administration, Office of the Inspector General; Amtrak Police Department (D.C.); FBI (Sacramento, CA office); FBI Cyber Task Force (D.C.); Washington State Department of Licensing, Driver and Vehicle Investigations; and the Department of Labor, Office of the Inspector General.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Cindy Chang and Seth Wilkinson.

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>.

Contact

Press contact for the U.S. Attorney's Office is Communications Director Emily Langlie at (206) 553-4110 or Emily.Langlie@usdoj.gov.

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