

Springfield Man Sentenced to 48 Months in Federal Prison for Wire Fraud in Connection with Fraudulent Scheme to Obtain Pandemic Unemployment Benefits

Friday, September 15, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Louisiana

United States Attorney Ronald C. Gathe, Jr. announced that U.S. Chief Judge Shelly D. Dick sentenced Chaz Ryan Watkins, age 35, of Springfield, Louisiana, to 48 months in federal prison following his conviction for wire fraud in connection with a fraudulent scheme to obtain pandemic unemployment benefits. The Court further sentenced Watkins to serve two years of supervised release following his term of imprisonment and ordered him to pay restitution in the amount of \$178,620.00 to victims, including the Louisiana Workforce Commission ("LWC"), Texas Workforce Commission ("TWC"), Internal Revenue Service ("IRS"), and the Federal Emergency Management Administration ("FEMA").

According to admissions made as part of his guilty plea, between December 2019, and continuing through at least September 2021, Watkins obtained the personal identifying information ("PII") of inmates incarcerated in Louisiana prisons and of other individuals, including names, birth dates, and Social Security numbers. Watkins submitted claims for pandemic unemployment assistance ("PUA") benefits to the Louisiana Workforce Commission ("LWC") in the names of the inmates, who were ineligible for such benefits, and in the names of other individuals, often without the individual's knowledge or consent. In these applications, Watkins requested that the PUA benefits be transmitted via direct deposit to his financial accounts or via pre-paid debit cards mailed to addresses under his control. Once the funds were received, Watkins withdrew the funds as cash from ATMs at various financial institutions in the Middle District of Louisiana. Watkins received over \$95,000 in fraudulent unemployment benefits.

Louisiana Inspector General Stephen Street commented, "Anyone audacious enough to steal taxpayer money during a state of emergency should expect to wind up in prison. Hopefully the sentence imposed upon Mr. Watkins today will make that clear to other aspiring fraudsters. The Louisiana OIG remains committed to pursuing criminal outcomes for individuals who commit fraud during public

emergencies." Street added, "I want to thank United States Attorney Ron Gathe and his staff, and our partners at the US Department of Homeland Security OIG and US Department of Labor OIG for our continued successful partnership."

This matter was investigated by the Louisiana Office of State Inspector General, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, and the U.S. Department of Labor, and was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Kristen Lundin Craig.

Updated September 15, 2023