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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Eastern District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, January 31, 2022

Virginia Inmate Sentenced for Role in Pandemic Unemployment Benefits Scheme

NORFOLK, Va. – A Virginia inmate was sentenced today to 57 months in prison for 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 Anthony White, 39, originally of Norfolk, was incarcerated at the Lawrenceville Correctional Center. Beginning in May 2020, he worked with Mary Landon Benton, 38, of Portsmouth, to collect the personally identifiable information of other inmates to fraudulently apply for Virginia unemployment benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. White provided Benton information for inmates at the Lawrenceville Correctional Center, resulting in approximately ten successful unemployment claims for inmates there. Michael Lee Lewis, Jr., an inmate at the Augusta Correctional Center, provided Benton and another co-defendant, Angelica Cartwright-Powers, with information for inmates at his facility.

Benton, with the help of White and inmates at two other prisons, submitted successful applications for Virginia unemployment benefits for 31 inmates. Cartwright-Powers additionally submitted successful applications for four inmates.

White 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 Lewis have both been sentenced for their roles in the scheme to 78 and 115 months of imprisonment, respectively. Cartwright-Powers, has pleaded guilty to one conspiracy count and is scheduled to be sentenced on March 24.

Jessica D. Aber, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia; Troy W. Springer, Acting Special Agent-in-Charge of the Washington, DC Regional Office, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General; and Dr. Joseph V. Cuffari, Inspector General for the Department of Homeland Security, made the announcement after sentencing by U.S. District Judge Raymond A. Jackson.

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.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Rebecca Gantt prosecuted the case.

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

Component(s):

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Contact:

USAVAE.Press@usdoj.gov

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