

Waterbury Man Sentenced to 4 Years in Federal Prison for Theft of Pandemic Unemployment Benefits

Wednesday, January 10, 2024

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Connecticut

Vanessa Roberts Avery, United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, announced that OLAJUWON HARRINGTON, also known as "OJ Harrington," 31, of Waterbury, was sentenced today by U.S. District Judge Omar A. Williams in Hartford to 48 months of imprisonment, followed by two years of supervised release, for his theft of pandemic unemployment benefits.

According to court documents and statements made in court, in March 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act ("CARES Act") was signed into law. The CARES Act created a new temporary federal unemployment insurance program for pandemic unemployment assistance ("Pandemic Unemployment Assistance"). Pandemic Unemployment Assistance provided unemployment insurance ("UI") benefits for employed individuals who are not eligible for other types of UI due to their employment status. The CARES Act also created a new temporary federal program called Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation ("FPUC") that provided additional weekly benefits to those eligible for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance or regular UI. The Connecticut Department of Labor (CT-DOL) administers UI benefits for residents of Connecticut.

Numerous fraudulent applications for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, which used identifying information of real persons ("victims") without their knowledge, were submitted to CT-DOL. Relying on the applications, CT-DOL awarded unemployment assistance in the form of debit cards in the names of approximately 43 victims and mailed the debit cards to addresses provided in the applications. Over an approximately 20-month period, Harrington obtained those debit cards issued in victims' names and unlawfully used the cards for his own benefit.

Judge Williams ordered Harrington to pay restitution of \$793,254.

Harrington was arrested on a criminal complaint on November 30, 2022. On May 10, 2023, he pleaded guilty to access device fraud.

This investigation was conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General; the U.S. Department of Homeland Security – Office of Inspector General; the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; Social Security Administration – Office of Inspector General; and the Connecticut Department of Labor. The case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher W. Schmeisser.

Individuals with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 are encouraged to report it by calling the Department of Justice’s National Center for Disaster Fraud Hotline at 866-720-5721, or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.