

**Department of Justice**  
U.S. Attorney's Office  
Central District of California

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **3 Inland Empire Women Arrested on Charges of Illegally Obtaining COVID-Related Unemployment Benefits in Names of Prison Inmates**

*RIVERSIDE, California* – Federal authorities this week arrested three Inland Empire residents on fraud charges alleging they used information belonging to California state prison inmates to file for pandemic-related unemployment benefits, with each causing at least \$345,000 in losses.

The three defendants are charged in separate criminal complaints, and each woman faces two counts – fraud in connection with emergency benefits and wire fraud.

With the three cases announced today, prosecutors in the Central District of California have now charged a dozen defendants with fraudulently obtaining enhanced unemployment benefits implemented during the pandemic. The defendants arrested this week are the latest of approximately 150 defendants who have been charged across the United States in what the Justice Department calls an unprecedented explosion of unemployment insurance (UI) fraud over the past year. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress and signed into law in March 2020 provided additional UI benefits to qualified individuals and helped provide unemployment insurance benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic to people who did not otherwise qualify, including business owners, self-employed workers, independent contractors, and those with a limited work history.

This week's arrests are the result of investigations conducted by the Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, the FBI, and the United States Postal Inspection Service. Investigators with the California Employment Development Department (EDD), which administers the UI program in California, provided substantial assistance.

Sequoia Edwards, 35, of Moreno Valley, was arrested this morning after being charged with filing at least 27 fraudulent UI claims over two months last summer, at least six of which used personally identifiable information (PII) belonging to California prison inmates that she allegedly received from her incarcerated cousin. As a result, the EDD issued at least \$455,000 in benefits intended to help individuals who were out of work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which did not apply to prison inmates. During the execution of a search warrant at Edwards' residence in February, the FBI recovered several debit cards issued by the EDD and \$45,000 in cash, according to the affidavit in support of her criminal complaint. Edwards is expected to make her initial appearance this afternoon in United States District Court in Riverside.

Mireya Ramos, 42, of Colton, was arrested Thursday for allegedly filing at least 37 fraudulent UI claims, most of which were submitted in the names of inmates in the California prison system and many of which falsely stated the applicants were barbers who could not work due to the pandemic. The affidavit in support of her criminal complaint states that Ramos obtained the inmates' PII from her long-time boyfriend, who is currently serving a life sentence in Calipatria State Prison. As a result of the fraudulent claims, the EDD, from June 2020 through January 2021, issued at least \$353,532

in unemployment benefits. During a court appearance Thursday afternoon, Ramos was released on a \$10,000 bond, and an arraignment was scheduled for May 4.

Paris Thomas, 33, of San Bernardino, was arrested Wednesday for allegedly filing approximately 49 fraudulent UI applications, at least 15 of which were filed in the names of people incarcerated in state prisons, a federal prison and county jails. “The 49 fraudulent UI claims mentioned above caused EDD to disburse over \$440,000 in UI benefits from June 2020 to December 2020,” according to the affidavit in support of Thomas’ criminal complaint. During a search of Thomas’ residence in February, the FBI seized EDD cards and a notebook filled with PII for more than 40 people, the affidavit notes. When she appeared in court on Wednesday, a United States magistrate judge released Thomas on a \$10,000 bond and ordered her to appear for an arraignment on May 11.

Discussing the fraudulent UI claims filed on behalf of state prisoners, the affidavits for all three defendants state “Due to their custody status, the inmates listed as named claimants were not...eligible to apply [for] UI benefits because they were not: (1) unemployed through no fault of their own; (2) able and available for work; and/or (3) actively seeking work.”

*A criminal complaint contains allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.*

The charge of fraud in connection with emergency benefits carries a statutory maximum sentence of 30 years in federal prison, and wire fraud carries a maximum possible penalty of 20 years in prison.

Assistant United States Attorneys Byron R. Tuyay and Julius J. Nam of the Riverside Branch Office are prosecuting these cases.

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