



U.S. Department of Justice

United States Attorney

Eastern District of Pennsylvania

615 Chestnut Street

Suite 1250

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106-4476

(215) 861-8200

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Four Chester County Residents Charged with COVID-19 Related Unemployment Fraud

PHILADELPHIA – United States Attorney William M. McSwain announced that Jennifer D’Hulster, 37, of Coatesville, PA; Zachary Gathercole, 30, of Sadsburyville, PA; Ashley Harrington, 30, of West Chester, PA; and Anthony Schweitzer, 20, also of Coatesville, PA, were charged by Complaint with fraudulently obtaining and attempting to obtain unemployment benefits related to COVID-19 emergency relief funds to which they were not entitled. Defendant D’Hulster was arrested and taken into custody this morning; the other three defendants were already in custody. All four defendants made their initial appearances in federal court today.

On March 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) was signed into law. The CARES Act created the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, which provides unemployment benefits to individuals not eligible for regular unemployment compensation or extended unemployment benefits, including individuals, families, and businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligibility to receive weekly PUA benefits was predicated on the applicant’s unemployment for reasons related to the pandemic; however, the applicant must also have been able to work each day and, if offered a job, the applicant must have been able to accept it. Once the applicant was approved to receive benefits, the applicant was required to submit weekly certifications that indicated that he or she: was ready, willing and able to work each day; was seeking full time employment; did not refuse any job offers or referrals; and, had reported any employment during the week and the gross pay or other payments received.

The Complaint alleges that D’Hulster and Harrington assisted individuals incarcerated at Chester County Prison and other correctional institutions in fraudulent efforts to obtain Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) benefits. Harrington enabled Gathercole, who was incarcerated at Chester County Prison prior to the onset of the pandemic, to receive approximately \$12,865. D’Hulster and Gathercole enabled another unidentified inmate to receive approximately \$11,410 and attempted to obtain PUA benefits for another inmate. Schweitzer did not actually receive any PUA benefits, but attempted to several times. The inmates were not eligible to receive PUA benefits because they did not meet the eligibility requirements -- namely, they were not able to report to a job each day because of their incarceration.

“Sadly, fraudsters consider a national public health crisis as an opportunity to cash in,” said U.S. Attorney McSwain. “That callous attitude rips off honest taxpayers who fund relief

programs and also makes it much more difficult to provide funds to those who deserve and need them. My Office will do everything in its power to ensure that coronavirus fraud scams are stopped and punished.”

“Unemployment insurance fraud has risen sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, and investigating these types of schemes remains a priority for the Office of Inspector General. We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to aggressively pursue allegations of criminal conduct against the Unemployment Insurance program,” said Derek Pickle, Acting Special Agent-in-Charge, Philadelphia Region, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General.

“At the end of March, 2020, the United States Government invested billions of dollars in helping its citizens through the pandemic,” said Postal Inspector in Charge Damon Wood. “From the beginning, Postal Inspectors in Philadelphia, and across the country, have worked to do our part in ensuring that those investments in the American public do not fall into the hands of fraudsters and con artists. I hope that the charges announced today serve as a deterrence to those who think that stealing or obtaining funds fraudulently from the most vulnerable amongst us, pays; it doesn’t. As always, I want to thank the other agencies that assisted in this investigation and the United States Attorney’s Office which supported the investigation and will see the prosecution through.”

If convicted of the conspiracy and fraud in connection with emergency benefits charges, D’Hulster, Gathercole, Harrington, and Schweitzer each face up to 60 years’ imprisonment, a \$2,000,000 fine, and five years of supervised release following any imprisonment.

This case was investigated by the United States Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General, the United States Postal Inspection Service, and the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, assisted by Chester County Prison. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Anita Eve.

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 Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

**United States Attorney’s Office
Eastern District of Pennsylvania
615 Chestnut Street, Suite 1250
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106**

**Contact: JENNIFER CRANDALL
Media Contact
(215) 861-8300**

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