

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Puerto Rico

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Eight Individuals Indicted and Arrested for Unemployment Benefits and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) Fraud

SAN JUAN, P.R. – On October 27 and 28, 2021, the Federal Grand Jury in the District of Puerto Rico returned six separate indictments charging eight (8) individuals with fraud against the Unemployment Insurance and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, announced W. Stephen Muldrow, U.S. Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico. These cases were investigated by various federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS), the United States Department of Labor Office of Inspector General (USDOL-OIG), and the Social Security Office of Inspector General (SSA-OIG), with the assistance of local law enforcement officials from the Puerto Rico Police Bureau (PRPB), the Puerto Rico Department of Labor and Human Resources, and the Puerto Rico Department of Treasury (Hacienda).

According to the indictments, the defendants engaged in schemes to defraud the Puerto Rico Department of Labor and Human Resources (Departamento del Trabajo y Recursos Humanos, "DTRH") by submitting fraudulent applications for unemployment insurance benefits, including Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) benefits. The false information submitted included false social security numbers and false employment information. The loss associated with these cases totals \$280,868.

Under the PUA provisions of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), a person who is a business owner, self-employed worker, independent contractor, or gig worker qualified for PUA benefits administered by the DTRH if he/she previously performed such work in Puerto Rico and was unemployed, partially unemployed, unable to work, or unavailable to work due to a COVID-19 related reason.

To obtain these federal benefits, individuals could apply online through the DTRH's web site: ww.trabajo.pr.gov. Claimants answered various questions to establish their eligibility. Furthermore, claimants were required to provide personal identifying information, which included their name, mailing address, gender, email, phone number, social security number, and date of birth (collectively referred to as personal identification information). Moreover, claimants had to identify a qualifying occupational status and COVID-19 related reason for being out of work. Claimants could also submit several documents as evidence of their income.

If the DTRH approved the claimant's application, the DTRH would send a check to the claimant via United States Postal Service for qualified benefits which could contain regular Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits and federal funds in the form of Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC), PUA, and Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) benefits.

Four indictments charge six individuals with theft of government property and mail fraud. The defendants engaged in deceptive conduct designed to fraudulently obtain multiple unemployment

checks from the DTRH by using false social security numbers. The defendants received UI benefits from the DTRH via mail in the form of checks that they were not qualified or authorized to receive. The defendants negotiated the various check fraudulently obtained from the DTRH.

The defendants charged in four related indictments are: Millisen M. Martínez-Medina, who prepared fraudulent applications; Stephanie Carrasquillo-Marquez, who fraudulently obtained \$23,304; Christian Colón-Rivera, a.k.a. “El Gordo”, who fraudulently obtained \$26,634; Zyllynnette Ojeda-Falcón, who fraudulently obtained \$11,586; Abner Colón-Díaz, who fraudulently obtained \$23,172; and Yesenia Marquez-Rivera, who fraudulently obtained \$23,172.

In another indictment, defendant José Calderón-Lantigua is charged with wire fraud and money laundering. The defendant applied for PUA benefits in Massachusetts, Arizona and Michigan and obtained electronic transfers in his bank accounts in the names of other individuals. Calderón-Lantigua fraudulently obtained \$43,970.

In a separate indictment defendant Emilio E. Mendoza-Aquino is charged with wire fraud and money laundering. The defendant applied for PUA benefits in Massachusetts, Arizona and Illinois and obtained electronic transfers in his bank accounts in the names of other individuals. Mendoza-Aquino fraudulently obtained \$30,092. In addition, Mendoza-Aquino is facing one count of wire fraud for fraudulently obtaining a Small Business Administration loan for \$98,100.

“These arrests reflect our continued resolve to investigate and prosecute those who try to exploit a national emergency to steal taxpayer-funded resources by using the global pandemic as an opportunity to steal from hardworking citizens,” said U.S. Attorney Muldrow. “We are proud to work with our law enforcement partners to hold wrongdoers accountable and to safeguard taxpayer funds.”

Special Assistant U.S. Attorney (SAUSA) Vanessa D. Bonano-Rodríguez from the Social Security Administration and Assistant U.S. Attorney Victor Acevedo are in charge of the prosecution of these cases. If convicted, the defendants are facing the following sentences: 20 years of imprisonment for mail fraud and conspiracy to commit mail fraud; 10 years of imprisonment for theft of government money; 5 years of imprisonment for misuse of Social Security number; 20 years for money laundering; and a fine of up to \$250,000 and three years of supervised release.

To report a COVID-19-related fraud scheme or suspicious activity, contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) by calling the NCDF Hotline at 1-866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>

The indictments contain only charges and are not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed to be innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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Topic(s):

Coronavirus
Financial Fraud

Component(s):

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