

PRESS RELEASE

Fresno Woman Sentenced to More than Six Years in Prison for \$300,000 COVID-19 Pandemic Fraud Crime Spree

Monday, March 27, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of California

FRESNO, Calif. — Cecilia Aquino, 32, of Fresno, was sentenced today to six years and three months in prison for submitting over \$300,000 in fraudulent unemployment insurance claims and Small Business Administration (SBA) loan applications during the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Attorney Phillip A. Talbert announced.

According to court records, from June through November 2020, Aquino went on a crime spree where she submitted fraudulent unemployment insurance claims and loan applications in seven states using stolen identities. The claims and applications contained various misrepresentations, including that the named individuals worked as strippers and owned interior design businesses, and that they lost money because of the pandemic. Aquino used the proceeds of her fraud for gambling, rent, shopping, and other personal expenditures.

This case was the product of an investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the SBA Office of Inspector General, the Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, and the Clovis Police Department. Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Barton prosecuted the case.

This effort is part of a California COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Strike Force operation, one of three interagency COVID-19 fraud strike force teams established by the U.S. Department of Justice. The California Strike Force combines law enforcement and prosecutorial resources in the Eastern and Central Districts of California and focuses on large-scale, multistate pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors. The strike forces use prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds.

Updated March 27, 2023

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