

Laurel Man Sentenced to 53 Months in Federal Prison for Unemployment Insurance Fraud Scheme Involving More Than \$1.5 Million in Losses

Friday, March 1, 2024

For Immediate Release

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

Co-Defendant Pleaded Guilty Earlier this Week to His Role in the Conspiracy, which Submitted over 200 Fraudulent Unemployment Insurance Claims Using the Personal Identifying Information of Victims

Baltimore, Maryland – U.S. District Judge Brendan A. Hurson sentenced Michael Akame Ngwese Ay Makoge, a/k/a “Hype” and “2Hype”, age 29, of Laurel, Maryland, yesterday to 53 months in federal prison, followed by three years of supervised release, for a wire fraud conspiracy and for aggravated identity theft, related to a Maryland and California unemployment insurance (“UI”) fraud scheme totaling more than \$1.5 million. Judge Hurson also ordered Makoge to forfeit over \$297,400 and to pay restitution of \$2,094,319.

Co-defendant Christian Malik Adrea, a/k/a “Leak,” “Lil Leak,” age 26, of Mitchellville, Maryland, pleaded guilty on February 26, 2024, to conspiracy to commit wire fraud, wire fraud, and aggravated identity theft for his role in the fraud scheme.

The sentence and guilty plea were announced by United States Attorney for the District of Maryland Erek L. Barron; Acting Postal Inspector in Charge Ajay Lall of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service - Washington Division (USPIS); Special Agent in Charge Troy W. Springer of the National Capital Region, U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG); Chief Amal E. Awad of the Anne Arundel County Police Department;

Special Agent in Charge James C. Harris of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Baltimore; Colonel Roland L. Butler, Jr., Superintendent of the Maryland State Police (MSP); and Special Agent in Charge Toni M. Crosby of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) Baltimore Field Division.

According to his plea agreement, from March 2020 to October 2021, Makoge and his co-conspirators impersonated victims to submit fraudulent claims for pandemic-related UI benefits in Maryland and California. As part of the scheme, Makoge and his co-conspirators obtained the birthdates, social security numbers, and other personal identifying information ("PII") of numerous victims which they used to prepare and submit fraudulent applications for UI benefits. The applications contained false information, including the victims' contact information, states of residence, and availability for work. These fraudulent applications caused financial institutions to load UI benefits onto debit cards and mail the cards to physical addresses provided and monitored by Makoge and his co-conspirators. Once Makoge and his co-conspirators received the fraudulently obtained benefits on the debit cards, they used them for cash withdrawals and other transactions for their own financial benefit.

A search at Makoge's residence on February 16, 2021, recovered 11 UI debit cards in the names of six victims from the bedroom. Makoge, Adrea, and another co-conspirator were present at the time of the search. The investigation also revealed numerous text messages between Makoge and his co-conspirators, including Adrea, exchanging the PII of victims and discussing the execution of the UI fraud scheme.

Adrea's phone was also seized during the search and in the notes section, he had the name, date of birth, and social security number of 22 victims. The total loss of funds tied to these victims in the notes as well as those sent via text message totaled \$195,556 and involved over 45 different fraudulent UI claims.

Further, Makoge made numerous ATM withdrawals using the identities of victims, personally obtaining at least \$35,540 as a result of his participation in the scheme. UI records revealed that the Adrea and his co-conspirators are connected to multiple UI profiles of actual victims whose identities were used to open accounts and obtain benefits without their permission. These victims are also tied to texts and calls between Adrea and his co-conspirators over several months. In all, Makoge, Adrea, and their co-conspirators submitted more than 200 fraudulent UI claims using the names and PII of victims, resulting in more than \$1.6 million in losses.

Of the 11 defendants charged in this fraud scheme, five, including Makoge and Adrea, have now pleaded guilty and two, Makoge and Dementrous Smith, have been sentenced.

Adrea and the government have agreed that, if the Court accepts his plea, Adrea will be sentenced to 65 months in federal prison. U.S. District Judge Brendan A. Hurson has scheduled sentencing for May 30, 2024

The District of Maryland Strike Force is one of five strike forces established throughout the United States by the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate and prosecute COVID-19 fraud, including fraud relating to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (“CARES”) Act. The CARES Act was designed to provide emergency financial assistance to Americans suffering the economic effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strike forces focus on large-scale, multi-state pandemic relief fraud perpetrated by criminal organizations and transnational actors. The strike forces are interagency law enforcement efforts, using prosecutor-led and data analyst-driven teams designed to identify and bring to justice those who stole pandemic relief funds.

For more information on the Department’s response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>. 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 (NCDF) 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 Erek L. Barron commended the USPIS, DOL-OIG, the Anne Arundel County Police Department, HSI, MSP, and ATF, for their work in the investigation. Mr. Barron thanked the United States Marshals Service, the Prince George’s County Police Department, the Montgomery County Police Department, the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, and the Charles County Sheriff’s Office for their assistance. Mr. Barron thanked Assistant U.S. Attorney Colleen Elizabeth McGuinn, who is prosecuting the federal case.

For more information on the Maryland U.S. Attorney’s Office, its priorities, and resources available to help the community, please visit www.justice.gov/usao-md and <https://www.justice.gov/usao-md/community-outreach>.

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