

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Eastern District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, June 24, 2021

Portsmouth Woman Pleads Guilty to Fraudulently Obtaining Pandemic Unemployment Benefits for Virginia Prison Inmates

NORFOLK, Va. – A Portsmouth woman pleaded guilty today to her involvement in a fraudulent scheme to obtain over \$300,000 in pandemic-related unemployment benefits by using the personal identifying information of over 30 Virginia prison inmates.

“This scheme resulted in the deliberate theft of unemployment funds that were intended to serve as a lifeline for members of our communities who faced financial hardship during the pandemic,” said Raj Parekh, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. “As Attorney General Garland recently emphasized, we will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to use all available tools to protect these essential taxpayer-funded resources and hold accountable those who seek to illegally profit from the pandemic.”

According to court documents, Mary Landon Benton, 38, worked with inmates at three Virginia correctional institutions to collect the personally identifiable information of other inmates to fraudulently apply for Virginia unemployment benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Benton submitted successful applications for Virginia unemployment benefits for 31 inmates across three Virginia correctional facilities. Benton also attempted to file approximately ten to twenty other unemployment claims that were not approved because someone else had already filed a claim for that inmate. Each application that Benton submitted contained numerous false statements that made the application successful, such as the inmates' contact information and last employer, and that they were ready and willing to work.

According to the Statement of Facts entered with her guilty plea, Benton took a portion of the successful claims and provided a portion of the proceeds to the inmate facilitators as well.

“Today's guilty plea affirms the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General's commitment to working with our federal and state agency partners to investigate fraud and identity theft that adversely impacts the integrity of the unemployment insurance program. We are grateful to the U.S. Attorney's Office, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, and the Virginia Employment Commission for their continued partnership,” said Derek Pickle, Special Agent-in-Charge, Washington, D.C. Region, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General.

Benton was indicted for her role in the conspiracy on April 8, 2021, along with three other defendants. The criminal cases against Benton's three co-defendants remain pending, and each individual is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

Benton is scheduled to be sentenced on October 25. She faces a maximum penalty of 30 years in prison. Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after taking into account the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Raj Parekh, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia; Joseph V. Cuffari, Inspector General for the Department of Homeland Security; Derek Pickle, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Washington, D.C. Regional Office, U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General; and Paul Haymes, Chief of Investigations, Virginia Department of Corrections, Special Investigations Unit, made the announcement after U.S. District Judge Raymond A. Jackson accepted the plea.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Rebecca Gantt is prosecuting the case.

A copy of this press release is located on the website of the [U.S. Attorney's Office](#) for the Eastern District of Virginia. Related court documents and information are located on the website of the [District Court](#) for the Eastern District of Virginia or on [PACER](#) by searching for Case No. 2:21-cr-33.

Topic(s):

Coronavirus
Disaster Fraud
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Component(s):

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