

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Southern District of New York

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, December 14, 2022

Two Defendants Plead Guilty To COVID-19 Fraud

Tatiana Benjamin and Heaven West Defrauded New York City's COVID-19 Hotel Room Isolation Program

Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced that TATIANA BENJAMIN and HEAVEN WEST pled guilty to defrauding New York City's COVID-19 Hotel Room Isolation Program. BENJAMIN pled guilty yesterday to conspiracy to commit wire fraud, while WEST pled guilty today to wire fraud. Both defendants pled guilty before United States Magistrate Judge James L. Cott. Both defendants' case is assigned to United States District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan.

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said: "As they admitted today, the defendants abused a program designed to provide shelter to the sick and needy during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In connection with the fraud, Tatiana Benjamin even purchased the personal identifying information of several medical professionals. For their brazen misconduct, the defendants now face possible prison time."

According to the allegations contained in the Indictment, court filings, and statements made during plea proceedings:

From approximately April 2020 through July 2020, the defendants defrauded the COVID-19 Hotel Room Isolation Program (the "Program"). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City created the Program. Funded by New York City and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Program provided free hotel rooms for qualifying individuals throughout New York City. The Program was open to (a) healthcare workers who needed to isolate because of exposure to COVID-19; (b) patients who had tested positive for COVID-19; (c) individuals who believed, based on their symptoms, that they were infected with COVID-19; and (d) individuals who lived with someone who contracted COVID-19. As stated on the City's website describing the Program, such individuals "may qualify to self-isolate in a hotel, free of charge, for up to 14 days if you do not have a safe place to self-isolate." Those who wished to book a hotel room through the Program could either call a phone number or use an online hotel booking platform.

BENJAMIN and WEST defrauded the Program in several respects. First, BENJAMIN and WEST each secured free Program hotel rooms for themselves by falsely claiming to be a respiratory therapist and a hospital employee, respectively. Second, BENJAMIN and WEST each sold fraudulently obtained hotel rooms to customers who were ineligible for the Program. Third, BENJAMIN purchased inside information from co-defendant Chanette Lewis, who worked at a call center that handled phone calls and certain reservations for the Program for several months in 2020. Lewis was hired specifically for the Program, which gave her access to legitimate healthcare workers' identifying information. Lewis sold BENJAMIN, for \$800, personal identifying information of at least five healthcare professionals, as well as certain "codes" to use when booking hotel reservations through the Program, such as an employee ID number and license number.

BENJAMIN and WEST used Facebook to advertise the sale of fraudulently obtained Program hotel rooms and to communicate directly with customers. For example, BENJAMIN told a Facebook user, "Friend at 311 gave me the juice for the hotel so I been booking ppl rooms," and when WEST was

asked whether she had “rooms” available, she replied, “Nah I dead don’t bro / All essential hotels are clipped” and added, “They finding out we was scamming the system lol.”

* * *

BENJAMIN, 28, of Brooklyn, New York, pled guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. Under the terms of her plea agreement, BENJAMIN has agreed to forfeit \$51,088 and to pay restitution of \$294,624.

WEST, 22, of Atlanta, Georgia, pled guilty to one count of wire fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. Under the terms of her plea agreement, WEST has agreed to forfeit \$23,684 and to pay restitution of \$59,644.

The maximum potential sentences in this case are prescribed by Congress and are provided here for informational purposes only, as any sentencing of the defendants will be determined by the judge. The defendants are both scheduled to be sentenced by Judge Kaplan on May 18, 2023, at 3:00 p.m.

Two co-defendants previously pled guilty: Tatiana Daniel previously pled guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge Kaplan on March 29, 2023, at 2:30 p.m. Chanette Lewis previously pled guilty to two counts of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge Kaplan on May 18, 2023, at 3:00 p.m.

Mr. Williams praised the outstanding efforts of agents, investigators, and analysts from the New York City Department of Investigation (“DOI”), DOI - NYCHA Office of the Inspector General, the New York Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Labor – Office of Inspector General (“DOL-OIG”), and the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York. Mr. Williams also thanked the New York/New Jersey High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Intelligence Analysts for their support and assistance in this investigation. He also expressed gratitude to the New York City Police Department, the New York State Department of Labor, and the DOL-OIG Atlanta Regional Office for their assistance.

This matter is being handled by the Office’s Complex Frauds and Cybercrime Unit. Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael D. Neff is in charge of the prosecution.

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