

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Middle District of Florida

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, October 18, 2022

U.S. Attorney Announces Results Of Multi-Faceted Strategy To Combat Fraud Related To COVID-19

Tampa, FL – United States Attorney Roger B. Handberg announces the results achieved by the Middle District of Florida's efforts to combat fraud related to COVID-19 during fiscal year 2022, ending September 30, 2022. Those efforts have included complementary actions by the Criminal, Asset Recovery, and Civil Divisions, along with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

"The U.S. Attorney's Office will continue to work with its law enforcement partners to protect the integrity of government programs established to provide relief for those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic," said U.S. Attorney Handberg. "Those who seek to exploit these programs and further harm victims should beware. We will prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law."

On the criminal-enforcement front, the United States Attorney's Office and federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies joined together in March 2020 to form the Middle District of Florida COVID-19 Fraud Task Force to identify, investigate, and prosecute fraud related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Since its inception, the task force has prosecuted more than 40 defendants for fraud schemes designed to exploit federal programs created or expanded to address the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Paycheck Protection Program ("PPP"), Economic Injury Disaster Loans ("EIDL"), Unemployment Insurance ("UI"), the Main Street Lending Program ("MSLP"), and the Emergency Rental Assistance Program ("ERAP"). These cases and matters involve diverse schemes, from traditional healthcare fraud involving COVID-19 programs, to violent gangs using unemployment insurance fraud proceeds to operate their narcotics businesses. These defendants collectively sought to defraud the United States of over \$52 million. Over thirty of those defendants have already been found guilty, while prosecution remains pending against nine defendants. (*See chart for criminal case details.*)

For example, on September 15, 2022, Marqus Johnson (40, Tampa) pleaded guilty to a 9-count Information charging him with bank fraud and illegal monetary transactions. Johnson formed and operated two corporate entities—All American Health, LLC and Next Level Health & Transportation, LLC—that purportedly were engaged in health care-related transportation services. In April and June 2020 and January 2021, Johnson use false and fraudulent representations to apply for a total of seven SBA-backed loans (one PPP loan and six EIDL) and received loan funding in connection with three of the loan applications. Based on his false representations, Johnson fraudulently obtained \$544,900, including a \$375,000 PPP loan.

In another matter, Julio Lugo (45, Davenport), a convicted felon on federal supervised release, conspired with others to steal nearly \$6 million from the SBA's PPP and EIDL programs and launder the proceeds of those stolen funds. Lugo pleaded guilty conspiracy to commit money laundering and was sentenced to more than nine years in federal prison on July 28, 2022. The court also imposed a forfeiture money judgment in the amount of \$4.4 million and entered an order of restitution in the amount of \$4.8 million.

The Middle District of Florida has been at the forefront of addressing the complex issues that arise out of investigating and charging frauds relating to new government programs. The Fort Myers Division, for example, was the first office in the country to take a COVID-19 fraud case to trial in *United States v. Casey Crowther*. Crowther was found guilty and sentenced to more than three

years in federal prison. The Orlando Division meanwhile handled the country’s first COVID-19 fraud-related extradition in *United States v. Don V. Cisternino*. Cisternino recently pleaded guilty to wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, and illegal monetary transactions related to his scheme to secure more than \$7.2 million in emergency funds through a PPP loan.

Further, the Asset Recovery Division and federal seizing agencies have completed the forfeiture of more than \$14.3 million of EIDL, UI, and PPP funds that were fraudulently obtained, depriving the fraudsters of their ill-gotten gains and recovering the proceeds for the victims. More than \$8.5 million in additional pandemic fraud proceeds have been seized and are pending civil or criminal forfeiture.

The Attorney General has established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. For more information on the department’s response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

Through the PPP, the federal government authorized over \$600 billion in forgivable loans to small businesses for job retention and certain other expenses through the PPP. The EIDL program provides economic relief to small businesses that are currently experiencing a temporary loss of revenue. The MSLP provided support to small and medium-sized businesses and their employees across the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. UI programs provided unemployment benefits to eligible workers who became unemployed through no fault of their own.

The criminal cases charged by the Middle District of Florida COVID-19 Fraud Task Force have been investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Secret Service, Internal Revenue Service—Criminal Investigation, Department of Labor—Office of Inspector General, U.S. Postal Service, Federal Housing Finance Agency, Small Business Administration, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation—Office of Inspector General, Homeland Security Investigations, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery, Federal Reserve Board – Office of Inspector General, Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation, the Tampa Police Department, the Orlando Police Department, the Manatee County Sheriff’s Office, the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office, the Sarasota County Sheriff’s Office, the Winter Park Police Department, the Osceola County Sheriff’s Office, the Seminole County Sheriff’s Office, and the Orange County Sheriff’s Office. The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys throughout the Middle District of Florida.

The Department of Justice needs the public’s assistance in remaining vigilant and reporting suspected fraudulent activity. To report suspected fraud, contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) at (866) 720-5721 or file an online complaint at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/webform/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>. Complaints filed will be reviewed at the NCDF and referred to federal, state, local, or international law enforcement or regulatory agencies for investigation.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed one or more violations of federal criminal law, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until, proven guilty.

Defendant(s) (Age)	Charge(s) <i>Max. Imprisonment</i>	Type of Fraud*	Intended Loss Amount

Tampa Division

Joseph Abdo (39)	Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i> Illegal monetary transactions <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i>	PPP	\$500k
Jorge Gutierrez Echeverria (33)	Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i>	EIDL	\$150k
Alexander Leszczynski (22)	Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i> Bank fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years</i> Illegal monetary transactions <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i>	PPP	\$200k
Charles Cunningham (72)	Bank fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 30 years</i>	PPP	\$800K

These COVID Fraud cases from the Tampa Division are being handled by AUSAs Rachel Jones, Greg Pizzo, Candace Rich, Diego Novaes, and Jennifer Peresie

Orlando Division

Brian Blake (30)	Possession of device-making equipment <i>Maximum Prison Term: 15 Years</i> Access device fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i>	PPP/UI	\$832k
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	Aggravated identity theft <i>Maximum: Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive</i>		
Emmet Bowens (53)	Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i> Illegal monetary transactions <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i>	PPP	\$740k
<i>These COVID Fraud cases from the Orlando Division are being handled by AUSAs Chauncey Bratt and Amanda Daniels</i>			
Jacksonville Division			
Jacob Byrd	Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i>	PPP	\$20K
<i>This COVID Fraud case from the Jacksonville Division is being handled by AUSA Kevin Frein</i>			
Fort Myers Division			
Venera Price (45)	Mail fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i>	ERAP	\$82K
<i>This COVID Fraud case from the Fort Myers Division is being handled by AUSA Yolande Viacava</i>			
Ocala Division			
Lavelle Harris (36)	Wire Fraud (14 counts) <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years per count</i>	PPP	\$1.2M

This COVID Fraud case from the Ocala Division is being handled by AUSA Hannah Nowalk

Adjudicated Cases

Tampa Division

Keith Nicoletta (49)	<p>Conspiracy to commit money laundering</p> <p><i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p>	PPP	\$1.9M
Rosenide Venant (37)	<p>Conspiracy to commit money laundering</p> <p><i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p>	EIDL/PPP	\$413k
Keaujay Hornsby (26)	<p>Racketeering conspiracy</p> <p><i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p> <p>Aggravated identity theft</p> <p><i>Maximum Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive</i></p> <p>Access device fraud</p> <p><i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i></p>	UI	\$3M
Kareem Spann (27)	<p>Racketeering conspiracy</p> <p><i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p> <p>Aggravated identity theft</p> <p><i>Maximum Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive</i></p> <p>Access device fraud</p>	UI	\$3M

	<p><i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i></p>		
Melinda Hernandez (33)	<p>Conspiracy to commit wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years</i></p> <p>Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p> <p>Aggravated identity theft <i>Maximum: Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive</i></p>	UI	\$1.5M
Richard Simpkins (47)	<p>Conspiracy to commit bank fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years</i></p> <p>Illegal monetary transactions <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i></p>	PPP	\$1.9M
Steve Moodie (33)	<p>Conspiracy to commit wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years</i></p> <p>Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p> <p>Aggravated identity theft <i>Maximum: Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive</i></p>	UI	\$1.5M
Marqus Willard Johnson	<p>Bank fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years</i></p> <p>Money laundering</p>	PPP	\$500K

	<i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i>		
<i>These COVID Fraud cases from the Tampa Division are being handled by AUSAs Rachel Jones, Tiffany Fields, John Michelich, and Greg Pizzo</i>			
Orlando Division			
Daniel Johnson (34)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i> Aggravated identity theft <i>Maximum Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive</i> Unlawful transfer of firearm <i>Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years</i>	UI	\$2.3M
Joel Greenberg (37)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud and other offenses while on pretrial release <i>Maximum Prison Term: 15 Years</i>	EIDL	\$430k
Teresa McIntyre (55)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud and other offenses <i>Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years</i>	EIDL	\$730k
Don Cisternino (46)	Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i> Illegal Monetary Transactions <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i> Aggravated Identity Theft	PPP	\$7.2M

	<i>Maximum Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive</i>		
<i>This COVID Fraud cases from the Orlando Division are being handled by U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg and AUSAs Chauncey Bratt, Amanda Daniels, Jennifer Harrington, and Dana Hill</i>			
Fort Myers Division			
Daniel Joseph Tisone (34)	<p>Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p> <p>Bank fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years</i></p> <p>Money laundering <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i></p> <p>Aggravated Identity Theft <i>Maximum Prison Term: 2 Years Consecutive</i></p> <p>Possession of Ammunition by a Prohibited Person <i>Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years</i></p>	PPP/EIDL/MSLP	\$2.6M
Liliana Gonzalez (31)	<p>Wire fraud <i>Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years</i></p>	PPP	\$169k
<i>These COVID Fraud cases from the Fort Myers Division are being handled by AUSAs Trent Reichling and Jesus M. Casas</i>			
Sentenced Cases			

Tampa Division			
Louis Thornton, III (63)	Wire Fraud <i>Sentence Imposed: 42 months in federal prison</i>	EIDL/PPP	\$815k
Kary Stevenson (48) Corey Quinn (35)	Conspiracy to commit access device fraud and aggravated identity theft <i>Sentence Imposed: 5 years, 10 months in federal prison (Stevenson)</i> <i>Sentence Imposed: 7 years in federal prison (Quinn)</i>	UI	\$1M
Bridgitte Keim (52)	Bank fraud <i>Sentence Imposed: 2 years in federal prison</i>	PPP	\$588k
Wayne Ganaway (47)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud <i>Sentence Imposed: 4 years in federal prison</i>	EIDL	\$300k
Eriaius Bentley (29)	Racketeering conspiracy, aggravated identity theft, access device fraud <i>Sentence Imposed: One year in federal prison</i>	UI	\$3M
Rolanda Wingfield (39)	Access device fraud, Aggravated identity theft <i>Sentenced Imposed: 3 years in federal prison</i>	UI	\$135k
Tywon Spann (25)	Racketeering conspiracy, aggravated identity theft, access device fraud	UI	\$3M

	<i>Sentence Imposed: 6 years and 9 months in federal prison</i>		
Randy Jones (34)	Wire fraud, aggravated identity theft <i>Sentence Imposed: 5 years and 1 month in federal prison</i>	EIDL/UI	\$250k
Julio Lugo (45)	Conspiracy to commit money laundering <i>Sentence Imposed: 7 years and 6 months in federal prison</i>	EIDL/PPP	\$4.4M
<i>These COVID Fraud cases from the Tampa Division were handled by AUSAs Rachel Jones, Greg Pizzo, Tiffany Fields, Diego Novaes, and SAUSA Chris Poor</i>			
Orlando Division			
Jacquavius Smith (21)	Possession of short-barreled rifle; felon in possession of firearm; and aggravated identity theft <i>Sentence Imposed: 7 years, 1 month in federal prison</i>	PPP	\$10k
Johnson Eustache (40)	Wire fraud <i>Sentence Imposed: 5 years in federal prison</i>	EIDL/PPP	\$2.2M
Joseph Harrison (43)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud <i>Sentence Imposed: 12 months in federal prison</i>	UI	\$2.1M
Tomas Ziupsnys (39)	Conspiracy to commit bank fraud; bank fraud; aggravated identity theft	PPP	\$2M

	<i>Sentence Imposed: 5 years in federal prison</i>		
Holly Urban (36)	Conspiracy to commit bank fraud <i>Sentence Imposed: 30 months in federal prison</i>	PPP	\$1.5M
<i>These COVID Fraud cases from the Orlando Division were handled by AUSAs John Gardella, Amanda Daniels, Chauncey Bratt, Emily Chang, and Jennifer Harrington</i>			
Fort Myers Division			
Casey Crowther (36)	Bank fraud, false statement to a financial institution, illegal monetary transaction <i>Sentence Imposed: 3 years, 1 month in federal prison</i>	PPP	\$2.7M
Anthony Bruey (36) Amber Bruey (35)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud Wire fraud Conspiracy to commit money laundering Illegal monetary transactions <i>Sentence Imposed: Anthony Bruey: 4 years, 3 months in federal prison Amber Bruey: 4 years in federal prison</i>	PPP/EIDL	\$881k
Edrica Leann Watson (30)	False statement to a lending institution <i>Sentence Imposed: 15 months in federal prison</i>	PPP	\$392k

These COVID Fraud cases from the Fort Myers Division were handled by AUSA Trent Reichling and AUSA Jesus M. Casas

Types of Fraud*

Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL)

Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)

Unemployment Insurance (UI)

Main Street Lending Program (MSLP)

Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)

Topic(s):

Coronavirus

Disaster Fraud

Financial Fraud

Component(s):

USAO - Florida, Middle

Updated October 18, 2022