

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Middle District of Florida

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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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 to date by the Middle District of Florida's efforts to combat fraud related to COVID-19. Those efforts have included complementary actions by the Criminal, Asset Recovery, and Civil Divisions, along with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

"Throughout the pandemic, my office and our law-enforcement partners have used all available methods to combat fraud related to COVID-19, and we will continue to do so," stated U.S. Attorney Handberg. "After the United States instituted multiple programs to financially assist those most harmed by the pandemic, criminals sought to defraud those programs for personal enrichment at the expense of the taxpayers who funded these programs. We will continue to disrupt these fraud schemes, prosecute those who commit crimes, and return ill-gotten gains through our efforts."

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 34 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"), and the Main Street Lending Program ("MSLP"). These defendants collectively sought to defraud the United States of over \$51 million. Twenty-five of those defendants have already been found guilty, while prosecution remains pending against nine defendants. (*See chart for criminal case details.*)

For example, Keaujay Hornsby, a/k/a "Plug," (26, Tampa); Kareem Spann, a/k/a "Reem," (27, Tampa); and Tywon Spann, a/k/a "Weez" (25, Tampa) pleaded guilty to a racketeering conspiracy related to numerous violent, drug trafficking, and COVID-19 related frauds that were committed in furtherance of a criminal enterprise called "Robles Park." Hornsby and Kareem Spann have also pleaded guilty to committing violent crimes in aid of racketeering and discharging firearms in aid of crimes of violence. Erius Bentley (29, Tampa) and the three other defendants have each also pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit fraud and identity theft, and committing numerous substantive acts of fraud and identity theft.

"Robles Park" is a criminal organization whose members and associates engaged in acts involving murder, assault, intimidation, narcotics trafficking, unemployment insurance fraud, identity theft, obstruction of justice, and other crimes.

In another matter, Alexander Leszczynski (22, North Redington Beach) has been charged with wire fraud, bank fraud, and money laundering; he is pending trial on those charges. Leszczynski used fictitious charitable entities, such as Love & Bliss, Inc., to engage in numerous frauds. The schemes included fraudulently applying for and receiving two PPP loans, engaging in a check kiting scheme,

and attempting to deposit \$2.7 million of worthless checks into the Love & Bliss, Inc. business account. The United States ultimately seized the PPP proceeds from an account Leszczynski controlled. In a separate fraud scheme, Leszczynski filed fraudulent warranty deeds purporting to deed himself and his businesses 10 properties around the United States collectively valued at more than \$300 million.

In addition to the work of the Criminal Division, the District's Asset Recovery Division and federal seizing agencies have completed the forfeiture of more than \$14 million of PPP, EIDL, and UI funds that were fraudulently obtained, depriving the fraudsters of their ill-gotten gains and recovering the proceeds for the victims. The District's Civil Division has similarly combatted fraud related to COVID-19 through its enforcement efforts.

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 identified in the linked chart 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, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation, the Tampa Police Department, the Orlando Police Department, 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.