

Massachusetts woman pleads guilty to stealing \$92,000 in Social Security, MassHealth and Food Stamp benefits

A Fitchburg woman pleaded guilty today to fraudulently receiving Social Security disability benefits, MassHealth and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Rhonda Bernal, 62, pleaded guilty to three counts of theft of public funds and two counts of making false statements. U.S. District Court Judge Timothy S. Hillman scheduled sentencing for April 5, 2021. In July 2019, Bernal was arrested and charged.

Over a period of approximately eight years, Bernal stole \$71,462 in Social Security benefits, \$6,444 in MassHealth benefits and \$13,505 in SNAP benefits (previously known as Food Stamps). In February 2015, Bernal falsely informed the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance that she was the only person in her household when, in fact, she was living with her husband. In addition, Bernal falsely told Social Security in April 2016 that she and a relative, who was not her husband, were the only members of her household.

The charges of theft of public funds provide for a sentence of up to 10 years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000 or twice the gross gain or loss, whichever is greater. The charges of making false statements provide for a sentence of up to five years in prison, three years of supervised release, and a fine of \$250,000 or twice the gross gain or loss, whichever is greater. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

United States Attorney Andrew E. Lelling; Tonya Perkins, Special Agent in Charge of the Social Security Administration, Office of Inspector General, Office of Investigations, Boston Field Division; Phillip M. Coyne, Special Agent in Charge of the Office of Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Boston Regional Office; and Suzanne M. Bump, State Auditor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts made the announcement. Special Assistant U.S. Attorney Karen Burzycki of Lelling's Major Crimes Unit is prosecuting the case.